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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

AND MARCH 25c

featuring
SHADOW OVER MARS
by LEIGH BRACKETT
BABY FACE
by HENRY KUTTNER
THE BEST LAID SCHEME
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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

VOL. 5, No. 2
MARCH, 1953

A Book-Length Science-Fiction Classic

- SHADOW OVER MARS** **LEIGH BRACKETT** 10
How would Rick fulfill the prophecy that linked his nome with the destiny of a dying world? He was a man without a planet, and he owed ollegiance to nothing—except his lust for power!

Other Classic Stories

- THE BEST LAID SCHEME** **L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP** 91
A gardener and o poet run o cloak-and-dagger roce through Time
BABY FACE (A Novelet) **HENRY KUTTNER** 98
The tough Marine sergeant swapped places with o diopered demon
HERO **HORACE L. GOLD** 115
They flung roses—and loneliness—everywhere along his path
THE WAR OF THE WEEDS **CARL JACOBI** 128
They'd all go mad before they could stop this weird influence

New Stories

- DEATH SHIP** **RICHARD MATHESON** 78
The coptoin had lost oll outhority over his men, over the ship
TOO BAD YOU DIED **JOSEPH SLOTKIN** 125
When you're born, you cry—and when you leove, we cry for you!

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Cover Painting by **ALEX SCHOMBURG**

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N. L. PINES, Publisher; **FANNY ELLSWORTH**, Managing Editor
ED ROFHEART, Art Director; **SAMUEL MINES**, Editor

FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE published every other month and copyright 1953 by Best Books, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokama, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription: (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Kokama, Ind. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the nome of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence. March, 1953. Printed in the U.S.A.

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You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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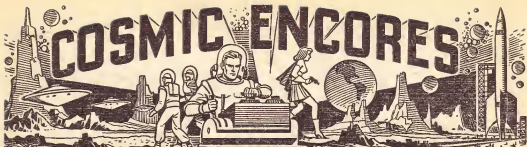
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A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE-FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

PEOPLE happening upon science fiction for the first time are usually fascinated by the many stories containing prophecies which have come true. In the past few years the parade of fulfilled prophecies has become so continuous that it has ceased to excite long-time readers who have been keeping score. The latest of science fiction's inspired guesses has just made newspaper copy via the Sunday edition of the sober and not-given-to-extravagant-statements *New York Times*.

According to this dignified pillar of journalism, a professor of architecture on the staff of the University of Illinois, Prof. Ambrose M. Richardson, has propounded his belief that the city of the future will be permanently covered by a transparent, plastic roof.

Plastic Pillows

The roof would not be supported by tall pillars or cables hung from skyscrapers. Professor Richardson's idea is to make a great number of plastic pillows, fill them with helium, float them aloft and then join them together for a continuous covering. With delight he points out the fact that to the city dweller weather will become a thing of the past, that rubbers and umbrellas will vanish into the limbo of forgotten things, that no one will ever again be caught in a rainstorm, or come home with wet feet. And city people, sojourning in the country will discover with wonder the phenomenon of rain and wind or the brooks through which one may splash.

As to what a severe storm might do to Prof. Richardson's plastic roof—he feels confident that heavy anchoring cables will hold the pillows against all stresses and strains. The materials are available now, he states, and there is no reason why an experimental roof could not be tried out on a small scale—say, starting with a football stadium and presumably working up

through a village to a full size city.

What is needed now is a philanthropist, who is scientifically minded, to come forward and advance the necessary cash to buy enough materials for a roof large enough to cover an acre or so of ground for demonstration and study.

Many of the problems which a roof on a city would raise have been anticipated by the professor. To cover ventilation he provides an opening in the roof through which cool air may descend. This down-draft would force the warm, stale air out under the edges of the huge umbrella. Industrial smoke and fumes would require more drastic measures, however, and the easiest way out, as suggested by Professor Richardson, is to locate them outside the future city. Water could be piped in as now, or with such a huge rain catcher available, rainwater running off the dome could be caught and stored, either for drinking or for watering gardens and so on.

And here is a revolutionary architectural idea—houses would need no roofs with the permanent all-over roof serving everyone.

At this point we are conscious of a faint, treasonable stirring. Our confidence in plastics is such that we would still feel a great deal more comfortable with a regular roof on our house, dome or no dome. Maybe we'd settle for a glass roof, but a roof of some kind. We have yet to see the plastic we'd entrust our privacy to, or our peace of mind.

What About Air Raids?

As to the destruction of his canopy, Prof. Richardson believes it would withstand an air raid. A bomb dropped from an airplane would undoubtedly puncture it, but in the explosion which followed, only the walls of the structures beneath would collapse—the canopy, presumably because of its height, would stand up and the

(Continued on page 137)

WHAT SECRET POWER DID THIS MAN POSSESS?



Benjamin Franklin
(A Rosicrucian)

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HAVE YOU HEARD—?

A Page of News from the Science Front



ARE YOU NEUROTIC? And do people tell you you've talked it into yourself? They may be right, but not in quite the way they think. According to Prof. O. Hobart Mowrer of the University of Illinois, you wouldn't be neurotic if you couldn't talk. Language makes it possible for man to lie, says the Professor and lying—or deception, to give it a more elegant turn—is a very prevalent cause of neurosis. See? You've got a conscience after all.

A PORTABLE TELEVISION receiver weighing only 27 pounds has been developed at the David Sarnoff Research Center at Princeton. The only tube in the set is the five-inch picture tube; for the rest, it uses transistors throughout, which cut down on its weight and size. Conceivably home sets using transistors will be possible in a fraction of their present bulk.

WHAT DOES YOUR WIFE THINK of you? And for that matter, what do you think of your wife? Surprisingly enough, there is a great deal of uniformity in the sexes' opinions of each other.

For example, both men and women agree that women are more faithful, have higher morals, use their imaginations more, have better poise and get along better with children. They agree also that women have a higher ratio of insanity, hold more grudges, do not control their tempers as well and have a greater sense of rivalry with the neighbors.

Men, it is generally agreed, seem to rate higher in general intelligence and all-over courage than women, are more stable emotionally yet more likely to transgress the sexual codes, are less prone to borrow money.

Both sexes come out about equally well in ability to take pain, in artistic or creative ability, in losing games and in obstinacy.

Who says so? Well, it was a poll taken at the University of California.

THE EARTH'S TEMPERATURE at its core is about 8400 degrees Fahrenheit. This core is generally accepted to be iron and it runs a little hotter than the material directly above it. The temperature of the material outside the core is accepted at 7550 degrees Fahrenheit. Now that you know, what can you do about it?

NOISE HAMPERS INTELLECTUAL and high-gear workers more than ordinary ones, it appears, according to a report from the Industrial Hygiene Foundation in Pittsburgh.

A measured noise which reduces the efficiency of a man doing a routine manual job by only 5%, may cut the efficiency of a high-strung executive by 30%. Like bad ventilation and poor lighting and over-crowding in offices, noise costs American business money. S. L. Hooper of Remington-Rand estimates the cost at as much as \$4,000,000 a day.

NEXT TIME YOU CALL AUNT MAMIE in Oshkosh, remember that the Telephone Company is amplifying your voice all along the line and you don't have to yell. Most people do, according to the Bell Telephone Labs. The longer the long-distance call, the louder they yell, as though unconsciously feeling they must in order to reach that far. Speech volumes, say the Bell Labs, increase about a decibel and a half for every thousand miles of distance.

—Dixon Wells

SHADOW





OVER MARS

A Novel by LEIGH BRACKETT

I

RICK stood perfectly still in the black blind notch of the doorway. The thunder of his own blood in his ears drowned any other sound, but his eyes, cold pale amber under tawny brows, watched the narrow tunnel of the street. Three shadows came slip-

*How would Rick fulfill the prophecy that linked
his name with the destiny of a dying world?*

He Was a Man Without a Planet . . . and He Owed

ping through the greenish pools of moonlight on the age-worn stones.

Rick's left hand rose and steadied. Harsh echoes rolled and slammed between the packed, still rows of houses. Two of the shadows fell without a sound. The third stood upright in a shaft of Phobos-light and screamed.

Rick saw him clearly—a black anthropoid from the sea-bottom pits, one of the queer inhabitants of an evolutionary blind alley you were always running into on Mars. Some said they had once been men, and degenerated in their isolated, barren villages. Others said they were neither man nor ape, just something that got off on a road that went nowhere. Rick didn't care much. All that interested him was that the black apes were trained now like hounds to course men from the press-gangs of the Terran Exploitations Company.

Rick had no wish to slave in the Company mines until he died. He hit the black boy hard in the midriff and shut him up for good. After that, there was silence.

Rick had never heard silence like that before except on the dead worlds. The Company press-gang was beating the whole Quarter, from the stews on the Street of Nine Thousand Joys north into the angle of the city wall, but the noise they made doing it didn't seem to touch the silence of Ruh.

It was like the alloy skin of a spaceship, that you couldn't touch with fire or acid or steel.

He went on, down the narrow twisting street. Doors and windows in thick walls, like gouged-out eyes. There were people behind them, all right. You could smell them: Hundreds of centuries of people, too many of them, living there. But it was like walking through the catacombs in the Terran Moon.

That was because there was a new law on Mars—a world worn threadbare and weary with the weight of time,

where the little laws of the city-states had been enough since men could remember. Ed Fallon had come from Earth with his Terran Exploitations Company, and now the Company was Law—at the frontiers, beyond ordinary law, making its own rules and breaking men's backs over them. The floating Terran populations fought the Company when they could, feebly. The human Martians of the city-states like Ruh barred their doors and windows and prayed destruction on every alien head.

Quite suddenly Rick was up against the city wall, and there was no longer any place to go.

Back of him the crimpers were working in. On the other side of the wall, even if he could climb its enormous bulk, was a three-quarter-mile drop straight down, to the bottom of the dead sea.

Rick turned. His eyes held a green light.

TWO Martian miles away across the sea-bottom, a rocket ship went up from the Company port, slamming like a bullet into the black sky. Southward the broken towers of King City stood high over the flat roofs. A good mile beyond that, hidden in a shallow valley, was New Town, the brawling frontier gateway to half the world whence Rick had come. There were no lights anywhere.

Unseen men fought and cursed and screamed, but the silence didn't go away.

Rick settled his thick wide back against the wall and let his left hand swing free with the weight of the blaster.

Somebody yelled. They had found the dead anthropoids. Rick heard boot-heels hitting the stones, coming closer.

Quite suddenly there was light.

If he hadn't been flat against the wall he wouldn't have seen it. He realized then that the houses on the left didn't

Allegiance to Nothing Except His Lust for Power!

run flush to the city wall. There was a gap about two feet wide, and about twenty feet along it somebody had opened a door, a thin, dim crack.

Rick slid into the tunnel, sideways—and fast.

A woman's harsh, angry whisper snarled something in Low Martian. A squatty shadow moved across the bottom of the light. The door began to close. Rick's shoulder hit it just before the bar dropped. Something tumbled away from



it with a whooshing gasp. Rick went in, kicked the door shut behind him. His left hand held the blaster.

Nobody moved.

The room was cut in the thickness of the city wall. It was little. It stank. The roof touched Rick's rough tawny head. There was a shelf bed covered with musty blankets, a table of ancient Martian work, hand carved from "yrl-wood" and worth more Universal Credits than Rick could make in ten years of sweating in a glory-hole, two worn matching chairs, an old woman and a dwarf.

The dwarf was curled up in the ashes of dead fire, gasping. He was no more than a child, thin, with green, slanting eyes. The old woman lay on the shelf bed. Rick took her for just a dirty old woman, until she looked at him.

Her eyes were like moonstones, and Rick would have believed she was blind, had he not noticed her brilliant, deep red pupils.

"Just take it easy," he said, in crude Low Martian.

They said nothing. They watched him. Rick's skin crawled.

Back in the street there was noise, but he could tell that they had lost him.

He squatted down against the door. His chest heaved, and his shirt, of iridescent Venusian spider-silk, stuck to his body.

"I'm staying here until they go," he said.

The dwarf hugged his knees. His eyes burned like green coals in the smoky lantern light. The old woman didn't move or speak. From somewhere out of the tangle of blankets a small red lizard appeared and flicked down onto the dirt floor.

"I will read your future," the old woman said slowly.

Rick laughed. "I'm strapped. I got kicked off my ship for slugging the mate, and my pay is all in the pockets of girls I met afterward. If they have pockets."

"I will read your future."

He scowled at her, and then shrugged. There was no way in or out but the door at his back, and certainly nothing to fear from them physically. The noise in the street was no nearer.

"Suit yourself."

"You do not believe?" said the old woman.

"That stuff's all right for women. Me, I believe in what my hands make."

She smiled, showing needle-sharp teeth like a snake's fangs in the wrinkled dark leather of her face. Her eyes stayed on Rick, with that queer intent stare.

She got up slowly and went to the table. She lifted away a cloth and revealed a silver bowl filled with clear water.

Rick laughed, without malice.

The old woman's blood-red pupils flared wide. "You're a spaceman."

"I was born in a tramp hull, and I've never been out of them since."

"The spaceship is built on a certain world. Is it chained to that world?"

"Gosh, no! What are you driving at?"

"The mind is not chained to the body, Earthman. Thought is like a ship. It can go anywhere. It can open the Gate and walk along the roads of Time. Time is real, as real as this Mars you stand on and as easy to reach, once you know the way."

RICK was scowling, his yellow eyes intent. "Maybe. But I don't believe in a future laid out for me like a treadmill. I make my own as I go along, and too many things can happen."

"Yes. But only one thing does happen. Tonight you ran away from your fellow invaders. You would have been taken for the mine gangs had not my misbegotten grandson opened the door to hear the excitement. And so, for the moment, you are safe. You came to a crossroad. You took one fork. All your possible futures stemming from that moment of choice recede onto another plane in favor of the actual one. Life, Earthman, is a series of crossroads."

"And you think you can shoot your mind up the line a-ways and sort of look over the next one?" Rick asked her.

"Yes."

Rick laughed. "Not bad. Then a guy could always know in advance which road to take, so he'd find the pot of gold and not the mud puddle."

"You still don't believe."

"I've always liked to gamble, myself. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

"No," she said slowly, "it doesn't matter."

She was looking at his face again, his hands, his eyes.

"Contradictions," she murmured, as though Rick wasn't there. "Work has made him thick and coarse, but the bones are fine. The jaw, the nose, the cheekbones, showing through the flesh as the iron ridges show under the moss of the sea-bottoms. But the mouth has yet no shape beyond self-indulgence, and the eyes—the eyes sleep!"

Rick laughed again, easily. "Is that why you want to read my future?" His muscles were relaxing. The noise in the street outside had blurred into distance again. The recent strenuous business of getting rid of his roll was catching up to him. He yawned.

He wasn't going to sleep. His mind was still on top. But he felt comfortable. The red lizard skittered across his feet suddenly like a tiny comet.

The old woman's voice had dropped to a whisper. "Perhaps," she said.

She bent her head over the water in the silver bowl.

It got quiet. The air was warm and close. The dwarf hugged his knees in the ashes. The old woman's breathing rose and fell with a slow deep rhythm, like the breathing of the sea. The red lizard moved in silent little rushes over the stone floor, going nowhere.

Rick's mind played idly with the picture of roads stretching ahead in an infinite network. If you got onto one road, and didn't like it, why couldn't you simply cut across the hills to another?

The roads gradually took on a scarlet color. They moved and shifted. He tried to keep track of them, but they flowed around too much. His eyes began to ache. He shut them.

"Yes, this is better," he thought. "Pull down a nice dark curtain. Wake me at seven, Ma."

The weight of his own head jerking against his neck muscles brought an instinctive grab at slipping consciousness. He opened his eyes starting half erect.

The old woman was standing by the table still half-bent over the looking-bowl. Her mouth was open, the breath going in and out snakily over her sharp teeth. She was staring at Rick.

The dwarf was on his hands and knees, motionless with fear, like a fly stuck in amber. The red lizard ran and ran and ran, with a terrible silent purpose, getting nowhere.

Rick's body felt as cold as a toad's belly in the rain. He started to get up. The crazy pattern of the lizard's move-

ments drew Rick's attention. Yet without looking at them he could still see the old woman's eyes—whorls of pale cloud caught around a blood-red star.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked her thickly.

He tried to forget the lizard. Part of his brain was already trapped in the scarlet maze. His face twitched.

"Hypnotize me, you shriveled hag! All that bunk about the future! Hypnotize me!"

Sweat ran out of his hair. He braced

Spinner of Mood

•

IT IS our impression that **SHADOW OVER MARS** is the story which made Leigh Brackett's reputation. Certainly it is one of the first of a series of gorgeous space operas which stamped her as a writer with the power of enchantment over her readers. As a spinner of mood she has few equals. Her stories contain that magical quality—color in new and exciting shades. Here is a story of ancient Mars, peopled with gusty, lusty characters. Astronomers may tell you Mars has no life but a few anaemic lichens, but her Mars will seem realer to you than theirs.

—The Editor

his feet. His left hand rose, bringing the atom-gun up.

"You'd put me under and then throw me out to those crimps!" he accused her.

Her gaze pressed against his, beating back his strength. Her crimson pupils blazed. Little red suns, burning and terrible.

"You cannot fire, Earthman," she snarled.

He fought his own finger on the blaster's firing stud. The red lizard ran and ran, winding blood-bright threads around his mind.

Suddenly, from somewhere, the old woman caught up a knife.

The force of her thought hammered at him. "You cannot fire!" it said. "You cannot fire!"

Rick's muscles stood out like thick ropes. He sweated heavily, crying with weakness.

The old woman started across the room.

"I saw your future, Earthman," she whispered. "Your future, if you live."

SHE set the point of the knife against his throat. "I saw your shadow over Mars," she mumbled.

Rick's veins swelled. His face twisted into a death grin. The knife point bit, then his finger pressed down on the firing stud.

As her face fell away from him, he could still see her eyes, burning red. He laughed, hoarsely, a beast sound without humor. Blood ran hot down his neck, but the knife had clattered to the pavement and she hadn't cut him deeply.

The dwarf let go a thin high scream and dropped flat, hiding his face.

Rick turned. After a while he got the bar up and the door open. He went out. The cold night air shocked some of the dizziness out of his brain, but it felt sluggish in his skull like it had been stunned.

"My shadow," he whispered. "My shadow over Mars."

He went back down the street. The anthropoids still lay where he had shot them. The invulnerable silence of Ruh hung heavy in the moon-shot dark.

He began to shake suddenly with reaction. Weakness overcame him. He leaned against a wall, his chest laboring.

Four black shadows came slipping on silent paws from a side turning. He didn't hear them soon enough. Whirling around, he fired, but they were already on top of him. He went down, under a weight of sinewy bodies, beast-quick, strong, with the musky smell of the furred animal.

Rick's head cracked hard on the

stones. He fought for a while, a blind instinctive thrashing of the body. Presently he became quiet.

One of the anthropoids stayed flat on the street. The other three drifted away into the silence, bearing his heavy weight with ease.

Some time later a small, hunched shadow slid out of the narrow space under the city wall and went swiftly south, toward the broken towers of the hills.

II

PHOBOS had set in the east. Deimos was no more than a red ember, low over the desert. The King City of Ruh lay silent under the sullen glow, its empty towers open to the wind. The moonlight was like a splashing of old blood on the stones.

Only in the lower tiers, that had been the rooms of state, the public offices, the libraries and treasure-houses, were the walls still sound. There was life there.

One flaring torch burned in the throne room, where kings of the line of Karadoc once sat, when there were salty blue seas on Mars, and green hills above them. Only the high seat and the people around it were in the light. Surrounding them was spacious, empty darkness, rustling with old flags, heavy with the ghosts of old glories, breathing out the dry sharp taint of death.

Llaw, the dwarf, crouched on the ceremonial rug, woven from the long bright hair of virgins whose dust had long since been blown away by wandering winds. The dwarf had been talking for a long time, half chanting, his voice ringing thin against the stone walls. His green eyes were crazy and wild in the torchlight. Suddenly he had ceased to be a child.

From the left side of the throne a woman watched him. She was not old in years, but she was ancient in pride and sorrow, as though some inner fire, banked but un-unquenchable, had sapped and dried her.

At the right of the throne stood a man. His tough sinewy body was half bared in the harness of a common soldier, much worn, but his arms and accouterments were bright. His face was lean, scarred, sullen, and savage, and his eyes were the eyes of a caged wolf.

This was Beudach, chief of the fighting men of the Ruh—a warrior without a battle. His soul hung with the tattered banners in the hall. To his King he had given his heart, and his whole knowledge of arms and the way of using them. Now he watched the grandson of the seeress as a prisoner watches the turning of the key in his cell lock.

On the throne itself sat a boy.

He was dark, and bright, and beautiful. He was like a swordblade, or a new spear, and the fire that smoldered in his mother blazed in him. He was Haral, last of the line of Karadoc, with the plain, ancient iron Collar of Ruh locked proudly on his young throat.

Llaw the dwarf stopped speaking.

For a while there was silence. Then Haral spoke.

"His shadow over Mars," he said slowly.

"My grandmother saw it, Lord," insisted the dwarf. "She was a great seeress."

"The rule of Mars to an Earthman," mused Haral. "The outland yoke hammered on our necks to stay."

The woman cried out, but the wolf-faced man was before her, bending over the throne.

"Now, Lord! Now is the time to strike, if there's any blood or pride left in the men of Mars!"

The boy rose, slowly. The torchlight crimsoned his white skin.

"Beudach."

The wolf-faced man dropped to one knee.

"Send Parras to me."

Beudach went away, smiling.

"Do you know where this Earthman is?" Haral asked Llaw.

"No, Lord. But I will find him." He licked his lips. "There is a blood debt."

"It shall be paid."

The woman set her hands on the arm of the high seat and laughed, once, silently.

Beudach returned. There was a man with him, a plump, smiling, youngish man in a sky-blue robe. His eyes were like those of the dead seeress, moon-stones flecked with red.

"I want word given to the leaders of every city that pays seizin to Ruh," Haral said to him. "Say that the old Banner of the Twin Moons is raised again, this time against the tyrants of Earth. Tell them to gather what strength they can, and hold it in readiness, and send their chief warriors here to Ruh, secretly, for a council of war. Llaw!"

The dwarf sprang up.

"Go with Parras. Give him the description of this Earthman, Rick, so that he can warn the cities to watch for him. Then go yourself and spread the word through Ruh."

LAW and Parras bowed and started out. Haral stopped them. "Wait. You must give them a slogan." He laughed, boy-like, his face aglow with excitement. "Give them the old one, the oldest one on Mars—the cry of the sailors and the seaboard men when the oceans rose out of their beds, and after that the cry of the people who live in the deserts and the wastes where the seas were. Tell them, Parras—*'The wind is rising!'*"

The dwarf and the seer went out. Haral sprang down from the high seat. He caught his mother and whirled her around and kissed her, and then pulled Beudach's sword from the scabbard behind his left shoulder.

He shouted and threw it high in the air. The blade turned over and over in the torchlight, hurling red sparks at the darkness, and fell. Haral caught it deftly by the hilt.

Beudach watched him. There were tears in his eyes.

Ten days later Ed Fallon, head of the Company, was standing at his high window, gazing out at the vast panorama

of Mars. He heard the door of his office open, but he didn't turn his head. He didn't have to. Only Jaffa Storm's tread had that particular strong, uneven rhythm.

"Come over here," Fallon said. "By gosh, it's worth looking at."

Storm put down his sheaf of reports on Fallon's desk and went over to the wide glassite window. He was a big man, nearly seven inches over six feet, with a body like a gladiator's under his black, close-fitting coverall, and his slight limp gave no impression of weakness. There was a 'Mickey' holstered on his lean hip.

He stood beside Fallon, dwarfing even his thick-chested, powerful build. He said nothing, but his black eyes saw everything with a sombre, rather terrible thoroughness.

"My baby," said Fallon. He struck his red-haired hands together and laughed. "She's growing up, Jaffa. Pretty soon she'll have all of Mars to play with."

His eyes had sparks in them, watching the surging strength of his baby—the Terran Exploitations Company, called simply, "The Company."

Fallon's office was on the top floor of the Administration Pylon. It was walled with glassite, and gave a full-circle view of the Company world—laboratories, processing divisions, foundries, forges, tool shops, the vast pit-head housings with their train sheds, and beyond them, far enough away to be safe from the rocket-blasts, the Company spaceport, whence the cargoes of Fallonite went Earthward.

Apart from all these, behind charged walls of metalloy, were the barracks where the Company work-gangs lived, while they lived.

The pylon was high enough to show other things, too. The sea-bottom, spreading away into pale distance under the Martian sun, its gaunt ribs showing naked though the blue-gray moss. And to the south, the Old City of Ruh, like the broken crown of a dead king dropped and forgotten on its soaring crag.

DEATH was out there. Age and cessation. Fallon thought no more of it than he did of last year's worn-out shoes. He watched the life of his Company, the thunder and sweat and surge of machinery and the men who bossed it, and it was his own life, his own blood and sweat and surging energy.

Young, that baby, like Earth's intrusion onto dying Mars, but already stretching out muscular hands to close around a planet. A planet whose central government was no more than a feeble token, with the real power scattered wide among the sea-bottoms and the barren hills. A planet practically untouched by outland hands until the discovery of Fallonite. It was disunited, ingrown, weak, an easy touch for the first strong man who could see wealth and power springing out of its fallow fields.

"By gosh," said Fallon again softly, "it's worth looking at."

"Yes," said Storm, also softly. He limped over and sprawled his huge length onto a couch, pulling cigarettes from his breast pocket. His thick hair was blacker than his coverall, his skin hardly lighter. He was a Terro-Mercurian, born and bred in the blazing, thundering valleys of the Twilight Belt, where legends had it that babies came with horns and tails, and with all the heart burned out of them with the heat.

Fallon turned back to his desk, looking with distaste at the stack of papers.

"Bah! I'd rather be back in the foundry than mess with this stuff."

"You're a liar," said Storm. "You're a conniving, crafty old fox, and you love it. You never were a laboring man at heart, anyway."

Fallon looked at him. He decided to laugh.

"You're not a comfortable guy to have around." He sat down. "How you coming with those new men?"

"Like always. There's one big yellow-eyed devil I may have to kill. I hope not. He's strong as a horse."

Fallon chuckled. "Nothing like a cheap

labor supply! And as long as I pull the strings that make the New Town go, it'll be jammed with the best supply there is—floaters, homesteaders, placer men, spacehands, bums—guys who can vanish with no kicks but their own."

"Until the law moves in."

Fallon roared with mirth. "Yeah! That worries me a lot!"

"Uh huh. Just the same, I hope they don't get leery about going into the Old City. I'd rather take 'em there. Not so tough on our men. The Marshies just sit tight and hope we'll kill each other off. In the New Town, they don't like crimpers."

Fallon shrugged. "That's your worry, Jaffa. Just keep those pits open, that's all I want."

"You'll get what you want."

Fallon nodded. He sweated over the papers for a time in silence. Storm sat still, smoking. Outside, the Company hurled its rude and alien noise against the quiet of Mars.

Presently Storm spoke. "I was in Ruh last night. Old Ruh."

"Have a good time?"

"Fallon, I smell trouble."

The red-haired man looked up. "Trouble?"

"The city feels different. It has felt different since the last raid ten days ago."

"What the devil! Are you going psychic on me? The Marshies won't even say good morning to us. And besides, those ancient washed-out little twerps wouldn't have the getup to make trouble."

"Listen, Fallon." Storm leaned forward. "I spent four seasons in the cliff-caves of Arianrhod, down on the edge of Darkside. The people aren't human, but they know things, and I learned a few of them."

His dark face twitched slightly. "I walked through Ruh last night, and I felt it, through the walls and the darkness and the silence. There's a new feeling in the people. Fear, restlessness, a peculiar urgency. I don't know why,



With Mayo in his arms, he walked out across the sand

yet, or what it will lead to. But there's a new thing being whispered back of those closed doors. They're telling each other *"The wind is rising!"*

His sombre black gaze held Fallon. After a while, in the stillness, Fallon repeated the phrase.

"The wind is rising."

He laughed suddenly. "Well, let it! It'll take a bigger wind than any old Mars has left to blow my walls down!"

The telescreen hummed, calling for attention. Fallon flipped the connection. "Kahora calling—Mr. Hugh St. John," the operator said.

"Put him through." Fallon winked broadly at Storm and then composed his face to a friendly smile. The screen flickered and cleared.

"Hello, Fallon," Hugh St. John said. "Are you busy?"

"Not for you. What's on your mind?"

"Mind? I'm beginning to wonder if I have one!" St. John's sensitive, aquiline face looked tired and discouraged. He had untidy fair hair and blue eyes that were unexpectedly shrewd and penetrating.

"Things not going so well, huh?" Fallon said.

ST. JOHN laughed bitterly. "The whole purpose of the Unionist movement is to promote understanding between Earthmen and the Martians, so that each can give his best to the other without hurting either. And what have we done so far? We've caused a complete break between the Pan-Martians and the Moderates, and the feeling between our two races gets worse every day. No, Fallon. Things are not going so well."

"Are there any new rumors of—well, trouble? Rioting, let's say?"

"We have contact now only with the Moderates, and there aren't many of them, as you know. They're shunned as bitterly as we are. And of course here in Kahora we don't know much about the Outside. You know what a Trade City's like. I should think you'd have more chance of hearing than we."

"There's nothing that I know of," Fallon said innocently. "Look here—you need more money?"

St. John nodded. "Well, if we could carry on our work in the Polar Cities there's a bare chance. The Thinkers are revered all over Mars, and if we could win them over they might swing native opinion our way. But you've already given so much it seems wasteful."

"I still got plenty. How much?"

"Well, about five thousand U.C.'s ought to be about right."

"Make it six, and let me know when you need more. I'll send the draft through right away."

St. John's eyes glowed mistily. "Fallon, I don't know what we'd do without you!"

"I'm not giving away anything. Mars means as much to me as it does to you." Fallon raised his hand. "So long pal."

"Good by. And thanks."

The screen went dead. Fallon leaned back in his chair and grinned.

"The fool," he said. "The dear, sweet, lily-livered fool!"

Storm watched him with faint amusement. "Sure of that?"

"What do you mean?" snapped Fallon. "I've brought that Union Party up practically by hand. Give them something to focus their opinions on, and they start tearing each other's heads off in no time, never knowing it's what I want them to do."

Storm shrugged. "I wonder?" he said.

"By heavens, Jaffa, you're so suspicious I wonder you trust yourself."

"I don't," said Storm quietly. "That's why I've stayed alive."

Fallon stared at him. And then, for the second time, the telescreen hummed—emitting a series of short, nervous sounds. The "urgent" signal.

Both men went to it, quickly. The screen sprang to life. A man in greasy coveralls leaned forward as though he were trying to come through physically. There was blood running down his face.

"Trouble in Number Five drift. That new gang has gone wild."

"How bad is it?" demanded Fallon, his tones sharp, hoarse.

"They took the guards. Beat 'em down with their shackle chains. That big guy Rick, he's leading them. After grabbing four Miceys, they dug in behind some ore cars, and they got four Miceys."

"A Mickey never gave you that."

The man wiped blood off his face with his fingers. "They're throwing ore fragments. My guess is they'll make a rush for the shaft."

"Very well, I'll be right down." Fallon killed the screen and turned to his companion. "How many men in that gang, Jaffa?"

"Thirty-two."

Fallon made another connection and spoke briefly to the huge white Venusian on the visaplate. The picture showed racks of arms and other huge men in the background. It had been Jaffa Storm's idea to have an all-Venusian corps of Middle-Swampers for his strong-arm work. Being outlanders and fairly savage, they had interest in two things only—food and fighting. Storm saw to it they had plenty of both.

"Vargo? Send fifteen men down to Number Five drift," Fallon said. "Take a high-power Banning shocker. There's thirty-two guys down there want to play rough, and they're all yours!"

III

MAYO MCCALL looked down through the glassite wall of her booth ten feet above the floor of Number Five drift. Thirty feet to her right was the shaft where the Fallonite ore went up to the surface. To her left was the brilliantly-illuminated tunnel that followed the vein out under the waste of the dead sea-bottom.

Mayo McCall watched the men running back and forth below. Quite calmly she reached out and closed the switch that controlled her testing beam—the ray that spanned the head of the drift and checked every carload of dull red rock for Fallonite content, the chemical-

ly amorphous substance that was already beginning to revolutionize the Terran plastic industry.

Mayo was alone. No one on the drift floor was paying any attention to her. She folded her arms on the table in front of her and peeled back the sleeve of her dark green technician's coverall. She pressed a hidden stud on her wristwatch.

The lens and half the silver case rose, revealing a microscopic two-way radio. Mayo counted five slowly, watching the men below. Her brown eyes held a deep glow. She had a strong, supple body whose curves even the coverall couldn't hide, and hair of a rich, warm, mahogany color that made her skin look like cream.

"Go ahead," the radio whispered.

Softly, distinctly, without moving her lips, Mayo McCall spoke.

"There's trouble with a new gang, here in my drift. Set the amplifiers and recorders. I'm going down . . . wait. A bunch of Venusian guards just arrived with a Banning shocker. This looks big. It may be just what we've wanted."

"Be careful, Mayo. You know what they'll do if they discover what you're doing."

"I know. There goes Fallon and Jaffa Storm. This ought to be good. Stay with me."

She pulled her sleeve down carefully. The loose cloth covered the radio. She opened the door of the booth.

The drift was empty now for as far as she could see. She went quickly down the plastic steps and turned left, going silently and keeping close to the red rock wall. The rails of the dolly road glinted burnished silver in the white glare.

From up ahead, around a bend in the tunnel, came the sudden brittle whine of a heavy-duty shocker cutting in.

The first beam was low power. Crouched behind an ore car, Rick felt the shock run through him like liquid fire. It made his heart pound, but the pain wasn't too much to take.

There were twenty-two men spread out beside him along the rail. The other

nine had been put to sleep with the Mickey shock-guns of the guards, in the first scrimmage. The focus of the Banning was widened to take in the lot.

"Jimminy! We can't take that!" one of the men cried out shrilly. "They'll step up the power."

"Shut up," Rick told him. The Venusian, Vargo, called to them. He looked innocent and happy, incongruously like a nice old lady with the dead-white hair coiled high on his head.

"You come out now, eh?" he said to the miners.

No answer. Vargo looked around. Jaffa Storm had just come up, running easily with his odd, limping stride. Fal-lon was some distance behind him. Fal-lon waved his hand.

"It's your show, boys!" he shouted.

He stopped, not too close, and lounged against the wall.

"Advance your power to the rate of one notch per second," Storm said quietly. The Venusian with the Banning grinned and took hold of the small lever. "I will count to ten," Storm said clearly, to no one in particular.

It grew very still under the cold brilliance. Rick peered around a wheel. The manacles clashed softly as he raised the Mickey in his twitching, jerking hand.

He didn't fire. The little guns had a shorter range than the distance a strong man could throw an ore fragment, which was why the rebels still had opposition. The Company men moved back beyond ore fragments.

Rick watched the lever click forward on the Banning. Little blue lights began to flicker on the rim of the wheel in front of him. His body began to jerk with the same erratic violence. Each separate nerve stood out in coruscating agony.

Jaffa Storm began to count.

Jaffa Storm's voice echoed under the stone vault with the rhythmic impersonality of a clock tolling.

When he said, "Five," one of the rebel-miners began to scream.

"I'm coming out!" he shrieked. "I'm

coming out!" Jaffa Storm stopped counting. He held his hand out, flat. The current stayed level. In the dead silence the man crawled across the rock, his shadow black and inhuman beneath him. His wrist-chains dragged, clashing.

Six others followed. Rick watched them. Once he tried to raise the Mickey, but his hand was like an old man's, palsied and without strength.

Storm began to count again.

THREE times the advancing lever was stopped while men crawled and whimpered across the rock. When Storm said, "Ten," there was only one man left beside Rick. He must have had a weak heart. He was dead.

"Cut your power," Storm said.

The Venusian looked surprised, but he thumbed the stud. The whining stopped. Rick's body went lax. He lay face down, breathing in hoarse animal gasps. Sweat lay like thick oil on his skin.

"Rick," Storm said, "are you ready to quit?"

After a long while Rick laughed.

"I suppose," said Storm, "you think I'll kill you anyway."

Rick's words had no shape to them, but their meaning was plain.

Storm nodded. He gestured to the Venusian. The man got up, and Storm sat down behind the Banning.

The guards and the dough-faced exhausted men moved back, against the wall. They didn't speak. Their breathing sounded harsh and loud. A still white glare filled the drift.

Storm lighted a cigarette, without haste. He placed matches in the pack, weighed it, and threw it. He didn't appear to strain at all, but the pack struck the wall behind Rick with audible force.

Presently Rick got his knees under him. He picked up the cigarette and sat back against the rock, dragging smoke deep into his lungs. It was quiet enough so that the faint sizzling of the illuminating tube sounded very loud. Rick looked up at it.

It was sunk in a trough in the ceiling and protected with heavy wire screen. There was no way to break it. Rick knew that. He'd already tried every way there was. The main switch for the whole length of the tube was back near the mouth of the drift. There were also switches for the individual sections, but they were not within his reach.

He sat almost at the peak of an oblique bend in the drift. To his left the tunnel ran into a dead end, without side galleries or even cover of any kind. Most of it, because the bend was shallow, was in clear range of the Banning.

Almost directly in front of him, in the opposite wall, was the dark opening of an abandoned side gallery. It probably led into a cul-de-sac, although it might, just possibly, cut into one of those endless mazes left by the giant mud-worms of prehistoric Mars, whose tunnelings remain fossilized under the sea-bottoms. In either case, it would mean only the difference between a fast death and a slow one, and as for reaching it, it might as well have been on Phobos.

Off to his right, across the naked, pitiless stone, Jaffa Storm dropped his cigarette and stepped on it.

He leaned forward. His hands touched the Banning with gentle delicacy. He tilted the muzzle high and flashed an experimental beam. This time the focus was tight, the power-whine hysterically high.

A thin stream of pale and crackling fire licked out, touched the opposite wall, and was gone. The smoking surface was fused like glass.

Quite suddenly one of the chained men turned his face to the wall and began to vomit.

Rick crouched down behind a metal wheel. His yellow eyes had the cold cruelty of those of a cat. His body was relaxed and still.

Jaffa Storm leveled the Banning, his dark face betraying neither pleasure nor interest.

He laid the beam on the disc of Rick's wheel and let it stay.

The nearness of the charge sent fire shocking through Rick's flesh. The wheel began to heat. Blue flames danced on its rim. Sweat poured down Rick's face, and dried, and the skin reddened angrily. His eyes were tortured.

He sprang suddenly, sideways along the rail, toward another wheel. The beam flicked over his head and came down ahead of him. He leaped back, making a dash the other way. Again the beam was quicker.

He dropped behind the wheel again. The beam found the disc and stayed.

RICK measured the distance to the gallery opening. He laughed silently, without humor, and gathered himself.

From the empty drift, beyond Storm and the men and the Venusian guards, beyond Ed Fallon, leaning white-faced against the wall, came a woman's voice.

"Stop!" it said.

Hasty footsteps rang against the tunnel vault. Voices broke loose in a nervous babble. The heat and the blue fire went away from the wheel. Rick looked around it, cautiously.

He saw the girl and she was beautiful. Even in that technician's coverall she made a lovely picture as she hastened to Jaffa Storm. Her hair clung in deep sorrel curls around her face, her brown eyes were blazing. She was so full of fury that she actually seemed to give off light.

"Stop that," she said. "Stop it!"

Fallon was coming behind her. He looked rather sick.

"I've stopped," said Storm mildly.

"It isn't enough for you to take these men off the free streets and chain them up and make slaves of them. You have to murder them, too!"

Storm rose lazily, motioning the Venusian back to the Banning.

"Do I do all those things, miss?"

"Don't try to be funny! You know it's the truth."

"How do you know I do?"

"Everybody knows it!"

"Do they? Do they really." Storm's

hand shot out so quickly that it was only a blurred flash. He pulled her close and said with friendly curiosity, "Or are you just trying to make me admit it, perhaps for someone else to hear?"

His free hand went over her with impersonal swiftness. She struggled, striking at him with her left arm. He laughed. He caught her wrist, and there was a faint snap of metal. He held her tight and peeled the sleeve back.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I thought so."

He stripped off the watch-radio and crushed it under his heel.

Fallon whistled softly. "I better take her up to the office."

Storm nodded. His black eyes were warm. The girl lay quiet in his arms. The neck of her dark-green coverall had been torn open, and her throat and cheeks were smooth as new cream.

"You're awfully strong," she whispered. She shivered and let her head roll back against him. Her eyes were closed. "I guess I'm caught."

"M-m-mh."

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked him.

"That might depend."

She raised her lashes. "I don't think I want to die yet."

HHE LAUGHED. He held her off, facing him, so he could look into her eyes. "That's awfully quick work, baby."

"Time doesn't mean much in a spot like this."

"You're a liar, precious. A most beautiful, lovely liar."

She said nothing. Her lips were warm, rosy and alive.

"I can read your mind," Storm said.

"You're awfully smart," she murmured. "Because I can't read it myself."

Storm laughed again, softly. He bent his towering height and kissed her, taking his time.

In the middle of it, with her mouth still pressing his, she brought her knee up, hard, with deadly accuracy.

Rick shouted. Jaffa Storm doubled up, his face twisted with stunned agony.

The girl kicked him again, on the knee, and broke free.

"I've trained my mind, too," she yelled, and ran.

The Venusians burst into a sudden raucous howl of laughter at Storm, who was huddled over on his knees, retching. The manacled men joined in.

Fallon made a grab for the girl. He missed, but some of the guards ran out and her way back to the shaft was barred. From behind the ore car Rick bellowed.

"The light switch!"

Her gaze flicked from him to the switch near the tunnel mouth, all in the instant between one step and the next. The switch was on the opposite wall, away from the guards. She moved.

"Don't fire!" Fallon yelled. "I want her alive." He began to run, with a half a dozen big Middle-swampers loping past him. The girl was going like a dark-green comet.

Jaffa Storm got up. He kept his body bent, but his feet were steadier than Rick knew his would have been. There was no expression on his face, not even pain. He struck the Venusian away from the Banning. He laid him cold, and never glanced at the body.

He fired. His beam went between two Venusians, close enough to singe them, and hit the wall five feet to the girl's left. She didn't falter.

"Stop that!" Fallon yelled furiously. "She's got to be questioned!"

Storm fired again. The Venusians had scattered out of the way. The girl dropped flat, rolling. The beam missed her by the minimum margin, and then Rick was on his feet, running fast across the stone pathway.

He shouted. Storm's attention wavered slightly. Without breaking stride, Rick threw what was in his left hand.

It was an ore fragment. It was heavy, and jagged. It took Storm across the left side of his face and knocked him flat.

The light went out.

The Banning was still on. Its beam made an eerie, unreal shimmer in the

blackness. Rick's eyes adjusted quickly. He was heading for the tunnel mouth before Storm hit the ground, and in the bluish glimmer he made out the girl's shadow, racing for the same place. Elsewhere, pandemonium was on a holiday.

Nobody chased them. They were afraid of the Banning. There was a heaving and profane commotion back against the wall. Somebody got hold of the Banning finally and screamed, "Watch out!" and started to flash the beam around. Rick and the girl collided at the tunnel mouth and fell. The tongue of flame licked the air, crackling, where there heads had been, and flashed past. Before it could come back they had plunged into the pitch darkness of the gallery.

It turned. They crashed the blind wall and clawed around the corner, and behind them the Banning beam hit the rock and chewed away in baffled fury.

"Come on," Rick said.

They went, faster than any sane people would have dared. They fought the rock walls and the trash of abandoned digging on the ground, the darkness, and themselves.

Three times Rick thought, "This is it. End of the tunnel. Dead end!" Then his groping hands would slide around a corner, and they'd go on.

Suddenly, quite suddenly, the drift changed. The floor was round, like a huge pipe, instead of level. There was no debris. The walls were curved, with a curious regular smoothness under the hand.

AFTER a while they slowed, and then stopped. The silence lay as dead and heavy as the darkness. Their hoarse breathing had a quality of sacrilege, like noise in a tomb.

Instinctively they moved close together, close enough to touch. Rick's wrist-chains clashed softly.

"They haven't followed," the girl whispered.

"No. They'll send the black boys. The anthropoids."

"We're in one of those mazes I've heard about, aren't we?" the girl murmured. "Where the big worms used to crawl before the sea-bottoms hardened."

"That's right."

"Is there any way out?"

"I don't know. Sometimes worm tunnels lead into a pit, or a cliff face. Sometimes the roof has been cracked. About this one, I don't know."

"Not a very good chance, is it?" But her voice showed no fear.

"I wouldn't give odds."

Silence. Their breathing, their body heat, their fear, mingling in the thick dark.

"What's your name?" Rick asked the girl.

"Mayo McCall. What's yours?"

"Richard Gunn Urquhart, but Rick's enough."

"Hello, Rick."

"Hello, Mayo." He found her shoulder and shook it. "You have courage, baby. Ha, I hope you ruined that big scut for life."

"That rock of yours didn't do him any good."

"I got a hunch it didn't finish him," said Rick. "I hope it didn't. I'd like to see that guy again, some day."

"And Fallon?" she asked him.

"Fallon and the whole blasted Company," Rick's voice was vicious. "I'd like to boot them clean to. . ."

After a while Mayo whispered, "Maybe you could, if we're lucky."

"What do you mean?" asked Rick. "Go on, explain."

"If we live, I might show you how," said the girl, "we'd better go now. Which way?"

"Which wrist am I holding?"

She moved it slightly. "The left."

"That's the way we go, then. And baby, you better be lucky!"

IV

WIND moved sighing through the broken walls, and the dusk came down to join it. Far out across the western

wastes Phobos rode the last pale glow of the sun edging the rim of Mars. Ruh lay silent, barred and shuttered, but not asleep.

With night, shadows crept through the streets. Some of them came drifting through secret portals in the city wall and then sought the heights of the King City, where they vanished. Upon entering the flaring torchlight in the throne-room, however, they became men.

Fighting men. Of different ages, sizes, coloring, in the harness of different city-states, but all alike in one thing—the look they bore. The look of wolves in a cage.

They sat around a table of blood-red wood worn hollow by the arms of centuries of war-chiefs. Haral, the boy king, leaned forward like a bent blade from his high seat, and the eyes of Beudach, who stood always at his right hand, were as steel in the fire.

Only one shadow remained in the Quarters. It was small and hunched and swift-moving, and its eyes burned emerald in the Phobos-light. It went from door to door, whispering, asking, and the name it said was "Rick."

High up against the stars, in the ruined Tower of Destiny, Parras, the Seer, bent his fresh young face above his looking bowl. His mind reached out across the sea-bottoms, the sand deserts, the age-worn hills. It touched other minds, asking, and the name it said was "Rick."

To the green-eyed shadow and the mind of the seer came an unvarying answer.

"Not yet."

"Wait, then," Parras would tell them. "Keep watching. There is a blood debt to be paid. Remember our slogan: *'The wind is rising!'*"

Down in the mine gallery, Rick put his hand on Mayo's shoulder. "Hold it," he cautioned the girl. "I thought I heard something."

They stood still. Presently Rick heard the noises quite clearly, somewhere far behind them in the stale blackness of the

worm-bore. The soft scrambling noises of many creatures, running.

"What'll we do?" Mayo asked.

"Keep going, I guess. I've only got one Mickey, and that won't even slow 'em down. Tired?"

"I'm all right. What happens when they catch us?"

"Ask me then."

They went on again. The going was fairly easy, the floor smooth and the turns gradual. Rick knew they must have left their original bore long ago, branching off into only the stars knew how many intersecting tunnels. He had no idea how long they had been wandering, only that it was too long. They simply kept going because there was nothing else to do.

The anthropoids, fresh and running easily by scent, drew closer by the minute. Rick hung back a little, behind the girl.

Quite suddenly Mayo gave a strangled cry and fell heavily. There was a dry sound of something splitting. Rick tried to stop, tripped and went sprawling on his face.

There was a smoothly serrated surface under him. It tapered upward, widening to the sides. He scrambled up and followed it, with Mayo beside him.

"The tunnel's blocked," she gasped. "Rick, it's blocked!"

"Sure. Here, climb up." He pulled her onto the top of the obstruction and began to crawl. Presently his head hit the roof. He reached out, groping. The obstruction curved into the side of the bore, sealing it completely.

Rick let his breath out, hard. He lay still, utterly relaxed, and listened to his heart. It was like thunder. The sweat felt cold on his skin. Mayo lay beside him, breathing unevenly.

Behind them, another sound grew louder, closing in.

After a while Rick pushed himself backward and turned around. He got the Mickey in his hand and sat waiting. His body was like lead. He slid his right hand out the length of the chain

and found the girl's slender palm.

She gripped his fingers, and her grasp was cold, like ice. They sat listening to the soft rushing footsteps.

Suddenly she spoke, rather loudly. "What is this thing, Rick?"

"Don't know." He ran his knuckles over the smooth serrations. "Hey! Yes I do, too! It's the guy that built this tunnel—the old crawler himself. He died here, and turned to stone."

He laughed, but not because it was particularly funny. He gave the fossil a crack with the barrel of the Mickey.

It rang hollow.

RICK hit it again, hard, and then he remembered the brittle cracking sound when Mayo fell. He got up on his knees, balled his fists together, and struck down with all his strength.

It nearly jarred his teeth out, but he knew. "Oh, cracky!" he whispered. "If I only had a pick, or a big maul!" He laughed again, sharply. He slid the heavy manacles as far down as they would go on his hands, wrapped the chain around them, and went to work.

He had a crack started when the anthropoids began to swarm up over the slope of the worm's tail.

Mayo took the Mickey. Rick went on pounding. They were so far back in the cleft between the fossil and the roof that the brutes had to come to them from the front only, and not many at a time. Mayo did all right with the Mickey, for a while. The shock-charge put the leading anthropoids to sleep, and their bodies rolled back to trip the ones coming up behind them. It was a blind fight. The blackness was choked with the sound of feet and moving bodies, and a rank animal smell. The anthropoids worked silently.

Rick drowned everything else with the smashing thunder of his manacles on the echoing stone.

"The Mickey's dead, Rick," Mayo reported at last. "The charge is gone."

"Come here. I've made a hole. Can you break the edges back?"

"I think so." He heard her kicking, beating and straining. Things snapped. Anthropoid paws found his leg and pulled him backward. He swung. He didn't have hands any more, only a numb mass bound together with metal. The mass hit something, and for the first time there was a scream.

"It's coming!" Rick heard Mayo say.

He swung again. The blackness was full of bodies. Every time Rick swung he hit something. There was a new smell, warm and dank and sweetish. His arms were wet.

There were too many bodies. They weighed him down. He went on swinging until his arms were held tight. He kicked. Things smashed and fell away from his boots, but they came back again. Presently his legs were held, too. He heaved and twisted. Some of the paws were shaken loose. For a moment he was almost free. He got in a few good ones, and then he was down again. From a great distance Mayo's voice was calling out.

"Rick! Rick, come on!" it said.

He tried it, but it was no good. And then suddenly a cyclone hit the heaving mass on top of him, and there were gaps in the paws that held him. Mayo screamed and tugged at him.

He used strength which he didn't know he had left, to thrash free. Mayo plunged down the hole, dragging his feet after her. An anthropoid grappled with him. He slugged it with his irons and dropped through into the inside of the fossil worm. Two of the brutes tried to get through the hole at once and jammed there.

Mayo helped him up and they staggered away down the worm's interior.

They were knee deep in dust. The intestinal structure had fallen away, crumbled, and dried, while the outer shell hardened. The clouds that rose behind them slowed the anthropoids. Rick and Mayo went on, far beyond their physical strength driven by a raw, primitive urge for survival.

It came to Rick dimly, after a while,

that something was happening.

"Falling in," he said thickly. "Vibrations—cracking it."

It was horrible in the dark. Smothering dust, the noise of splitting destruction everywhere. Parts of the shell had become homogenous with the hardened mud, and apparently that was caving in, too. The miners always feared the treacherous strata away from the true rock that held the ore veins.

There were screams again behind them.

"When we reach the head there won't be any place to go," Mayo said suddenly. "Solid rock."

The cracking ran forward over their heads. A falling mass grazed Rick's shoulder. He pushed the girl on faster. Dust rolled strangling against their lungs. There was a terrible, crushing, bottled-up thunder.

Their heads struck the top abruptly. They dropped, crawling. The space narrowed in on them. The dust thickened. Mayo whimpered hoarsely. There was a ripping, splitting crash!

Dead end. . . .

SEVERAL days later, Hugh St. John was standing on the terrace of his apartment, well up in the tallest building in Kahora, the Trade City for Mars. His sensitive young face was drawn and grim. He was nervously smoking a slender Venusian cigarette.

Kahora was halfway around the planet from Ruh and Fallon's Company. It was night. Deimos rode low in the purple-black sky above the glassite dome that covered the city, shielding its polyglot inhabitants from the naked weather of Mars.

Down below, the streets of Kahora lay like a little web of jewels. St. John listened to the city's pulse. It was a slow, quiet beat. The business that went on here was the sterile handling of things already made and done, figures added up by sleek men who spent their idle hours in the Dream Palace and the exotic night clubs. Even the air was artificial,

carefully cleaned, scented and kept at an even temperature.

He had been in Vhia, the Trade City for Venus. That hadn't been so bad. Venus was a young planet, lusty and strong. Even the glassite dome hadn't been able to keep out the savage beat of the rains and the sense of hot jungle just outside. Men were busy there, too, the heart and brain of the commerce of a thrusting, aggressive world. Where there was enmity with the Venusians, it had been a healthy one.

Here everything was old, passive, faded and worn out. Even the Martian hatred of the Earthmen, the invaders, was a silent thing, festering in barren darkness. The stream of Martian trade flowed through Kahora like the chilling blood of an old man already three-quarters dead.

St. John's mouth twisted bitterly. The only living thing on Mars was Ed Fallon and his alter ego, the Company. Alive, he thought, like an evil beast—hungry, independent, and fatal.

Presently the robot servant at the door identified and admitted the man St. John had been waiting for.

"Mak," St. John cried. "Mak, did you find out anything?"

Eran Mak shook his head. He was Martian, a Low-canaler from over Jekkara way, and he looked like what he was—a civilized bandit. The dubious face of his people went as far back into Martian history as the history itself. He was small, tough and wiry, with a slender dark face, a friendly smile, and eyes like drops of hot gold. He wore a cluster of tiny bells in his left ear, and his clothing, the fashionable white tunic of the Trade Cities, gave him the satanic look.

"I'm afraid there's not much hope, Hugh," he said quietly. "I finally made connections with Christy. Since they found out about Mayo, he's scared green. She and this fellow Rick got away all right, into an abandoned drift, but heaven only knows what happened after that. Christy says they sent the black boys after them, and only a few came back.

Some of them were all messed up—crushed arms and such, as though they'd been caught in a cave-in. So I guess they're both done for."

He lifted his lean shoulders. St. John turned away.

"Were you in love with her, Hugh?" Eran Mak was one of the few who could venture to ask such a question. He was St. John's best friend.

"I don't know. I don't think I could have sent her there if I had been in love with her. And yet, when I knew she was caught, and her radio suddenly stopped sending, my heart turned to ice." Suddenly he shivered. "Mak, if she's dead, then I killed her!"

"She knew what she was doing," Mak consoled him.

St. John shuddered again. He sat down and put his face in his hands.

Eran Mak crossed the terrace and also seated himself, the little bells tinkling faintly as he moved. He smoked a cigarette in silence. Then he frowned.

"This is going to make Fallon awfully suspicious," he said.

St. John drew a long breath. "That's true. Well, I'll stall him as long as I can. Anyway, I cashed his last draft!" He rose abruptly. "I don't know how we can manage to continue the work without the rat's money."

"It may not matter. There's a storm brewing, Hugh. One devil of a big, thundering storm. It's all under cover, but here and there a little puff of breeze warns of a gathering tornado. It may blow us all clean off Mars."

"And this world's last chance for life will be gone. I've failed, Mak. My whole plan has been a fool's dream from the beginning."

He gripped the rail of the terrace, looking out over the jewelled city.

"Think what we could give them, Mak, if they'd only let us! The strength, the new ideas, the new roads to travel! But they won't allow it. They slam their doors in our faces, and the Martian Planetary Government only refrains from kicking us off into space because

they don't want open trouble with Earth and Venus.

"Only Ed Fallon gets anywhere. He's going to own all Mars in a few years, because of that cursed ore he discovered. Money will make such a big noise in the Government's ears that any yelling the people do won't amount to a penny whistle in a hurricane. And Mars will be just as dead, either way it goes."

He hit the rail hard with his hand and started pacing.

"My only chance of getting rid of Fallon failed when Mayo was caught before she could get proof of what he and Storm are doing. With that, I might have gone to the Interplanetary Co-ordination Authority—their Labor Board would have made an investigation. But now it's too late!"

He sat down again.

Eran Mak set the tiny bells chiming with his fingertip.

"You know what I think?" he answered. "I think the job needed a bigger man than you, or me, or any of us. It would take a whale of a big man to unify Mars—all the scraps and pieces of us from Jekkara to the Pole, withdrawn into our little city-shells, sitting in the dust and hugging our memories. If we could find a Goliath like that, there might still be a chance."

"You might as well ask for Phobos to balance those bells in your ear." St. John leaned back and closed his eyes. He looked indescribably bitter and tired.

"Besides," he added, with a faint smile, "if we found a Goliath, someone else would find a David to slay him."

V

THERE was fresh air. There was pain. There was darkness, threaded with a greenish glow. Rick stirred.

After a long time he was on his hands and knees, coughing in the dust. Back of him about three feet he was aware of a solid mass walling him in. Ahead there was a ragged rift in the blackness, through which seeped moonlight.

In the moonlight, he saw Mayo's face, still and white as stone.

He put his hand on her throat. It was warm. There was a pulse-beat. The discovery brought him happiness and relief.

He spoke to her. She moaned faintly, and that was all.

Rick crawled past her and shoved against the stuff barring his way. It was rotten, already half gone from the shaking of the slide. Presently the hole was big enough to get through.

It came to him to wonder why the worm's fossil head had not collapsed with the rest of it. There was enough moonlight coming in now to show how close they had come to dying. He looked at the upper surface, almost touching his face.

Then he understood. The worm's digging end had been sheathed with armor plate like the point of a drill, and it was still as strong as a granite arch.

Rick patted it and smiled. Then he crawled out, backward, dragging Mayo's dead weight.

He found himself high on the face of a crumbling cliff. The worm had died with its head not two feet from open water. Now there was no water. There was a lonesome, aimless wind and a maze of shadows racing under the swinging moons, and the cold dry smell of dead land.

At the foot of the cliff was a tumbled slope covered with gray-green moss, and then the desert began. It stretched as far as Rick could see, in bleached waves of sand that rolled like surf under the wind and the moon-shadows.

Out across it, far out, there was a city.

The city lay in the bed of the dry sea, thrusting its marble spires to the sky in a stricken gesture of prayer. Even while Rick watched it, it flickered like a breaking dream, obscured by drifting veils of dust.

It was the only thing in the whole landscape that held even a suggestion of human life. Rick got stiffly to his feet. His whole body ached, but he could make it work. He went down the cliff, sliding, half falling, dragging the unconscious girl. His shackle chain made a loud ringing jangle against the rock.

He got Mayo up into his arms. Her throat and arms were foam-white in the moonlight, her thick hair falling dark against Rick's skin. They were both half naked, dusty, stained with blood.

He walked out across the sand, setting one foot doggedly before the other. The swinging chain tolled in the silence like a cracked bell.

He was close to the city when little winged people appeared. Rick remembered having heard legends of them. Like the anthropoids, they were end-

THE ADVENTURES OF

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products, the left-overs of a race incredibly ancient, once powerful, now reduced to a mere forgotten handful clinging to empty cities lost in the sand—cities that had once been island kingdoms in a blue sea.

The winged ones drifted out from the white towers, out across the little racing moons. They were light and indescribably beautiful, and their wings shimmered with soft secret fires like opals under mist. They clustered round and followed Rick, who tramped on doggedly. They tossed on the wind like huge petals, making no sound. Rick could see their eyes, glowing up a faint phosphorescence.

Presently a marble wall loomed up in front of Rick and halted him.

He settled the girl carefully on the sand and turned around. He had no particular idea of what he was going to do. The gossamer creatures fluttered down onto the blowing sand. They were human in body, slender and graceful, wearing only short kilts. There were both men and women. Their skin was covered with a fine silky fur, almost like bird-down, and they were no more than four feet tall.

One of the men landed nearby. His handsome little face held neither friendliness nor enmity. "You are Rick," he said in a clear, soft voice. Then he whipped a pencil-tube from his girdle

and fired.

Rick slid down into utter darkness. The last conscious picture he took with him was not of the man with the tube, but of a tiny woman, poised like the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the greenish moonlight, watching him with huge, still eyes.

It was the eyes most of all he remembered. . . .

HE LAY on his back, comfortably, on a pile of silks and furs. He was rested and without pain, except for a slight stiffness. His hands were still chained.

The little woman sat beside him, her slender body shining like new gold in a flood of sunlight from a huge arched window high in the wall. A second glance told Rick she was little more than a girl, with all the beauty that blossoms just across the threshold from childhood. Her hand lay small and warm on Rick's bare chest.

"I have been finding out if you live," she said. "You live strongly."

Rick laughed and sat up. "What's your name?"

"Kyra."

He shook her hand gravely. It was like a doll's hand.

Somebody near stirred and yawned.

"Your mate is awake," Kyra said. Her

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

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*It costs
no more
to get
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speech was pure High Martian, and a little difficult for Rick to follow.

"Mate?" He shook his head. "No. Just a swell girl I almost died with." He got up. Mayo was sitting up on a second heap of furs and bright cloths. She smiled.

"Hello, Rick. For heaven's sake where are we, and how did we get here?" She stared at Kyra.

Rick told her what he knew. "The city is called Caer Hebra," Kyra explained. "We have lived in it always, since the world was. There were many of us, once."

Rick looked around him. They were on sort of broad terrace, inlaid magnificently with colored stones Rick had no names for. The pattern had a curiously infinite quality, without beginning or end. It did strange things to anyone who looked too long. Above them, the roof soared in a pure arch of veined marble.

Only one great window could be seen. They were bas-reliefs on the walls, alive and almost breathing. They showed men and women like Kyra, only they were as big as Rick and Mayo. There were trees in the picture, birds and beasts and once a sea with ships on it.

Rick also noticed a low, carved railing, and in the centre of it were steps. They were wide enough to march an army down, and they descended majestically into blue shadows and—sand!

It choked the vast hall below, flowing around the waists of sculptured figures, leaving here and there an impotent pleading hand or a half-smothered head where the statuary had been set lower. It crawled out from the high window, lapping at the steps.

Rick became aware of a peculiar rustling sound, like the breathing of a sleeping giant, the rubbing of the desert against the outer walls.

"There are many levels below this," said Kyra. "When my father was a child he played here, and there was no sand." She looked up at the window. A feathery plume blew in and sifted down

to the terrace. Rick shivered.

He realized presently that both he and Mayo had been washed and treated with ointments. Kyra set food before them, bringing it from a table beside a massive bronze door. They ate.

"Kyra, what goes on here?" Rick said. "I remember some guy raved me. How did he know my name?"

Kyra explained, and Rick's face hardened.

"A blood debt!" he said. "By golly, if they think they're going to sacrifice me, they're wrong!"

"My people will come at dusk to carry you back to Ruh." Kyra's luminous eyes held a shimmer of tears. "They will kill you," she whispered. "And you live—so strongly!"

She caught his hands suddenly, stretching her little self up to him. "I've heard them talk. I know the prophecy—your 'shadow over Mars.' They hate and fear you." Her next words were almost choked by tears and eagerness, and came tumbling out in an incoherent flood.

"I think you would bring life to Mars instead of death," she said. "You have life in you, so much life, and we are dying. Don't let them kill you, Rick!"

He smiled and stroked her feathery soft hair. "Better not let your people hear you talk like that. They know you're here?"

"No. Oh, Rick!"

She looked up at him. He bent and kissed her small trembling lips and suddenly she pulled away from him. For the first time she was shy. Spreading her wings, she darted away up the shaft of sunlight and was gone.

RICK sat down, rather helplessly, and looked at Mayo. There were tears in her brown eyes.

"Yeah," said Rick softly. "Isn't it!"

"Rick, I don't understand. What prophecy?"

He told her about the seeress.

"I didn't mean to kill her! But she had me crazy. Also she tried to knife

me." He tilted his head back so Mayo could see the half-healed cut on his throat.

She didn't say anything. She sat staring at him with such an intent yet distant look that presently he moved restlessly.

It wasn't so much her look that disturbed him. It was because her hair was afire with sunlight and her skin was like Venusian mist at dawn, luccent pearl flushed over with sultry warmth. A muscle began to twitch in his cheek.

She rose and put her hands on his arms and studied him.

"The old woman was right," she said. "Kyra's right. There's strength in you, Rick. It's dormant, but it's there. You've never done much with your life, have you?"

"I've enjoyed it, most of it."

"But you haven't built things. You haven't been going anywhere. Have you thought, Rick, that maybe there was something in that prophecy?"

He laughed. "I'd look fine, wouldn't I, as a shining savior!"

"I think," she said quietly, "you might look very fine."

He didn't move for a long moment, didn't breathe. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her. Presently, they drew apart.

"Rick, we must have a talk," she said then. "There isn't much time, and we've got to do something!"

"There's nothing to do, baby. Maybe later, there'll be a break. But right now, unless we can sprout wings like the kid, we've got to wait. Anyway, they've got nothing against you. You're in the clear."

"Don't tell me that!" Mayo stirred impatiently against the white fur on which she was lying. "Listen, Rick. Back there in that tunnel you said you wanted to drive Fallon and his gang off Mars."

Rick nodded. His cat-eyes blazed.

"Then will you come in with us, with Hugh St. John and me?" she asked him. "Rick, I tell you union is the only hope

for Mars. Maybe you're the man who can bring it about. That old woman didn't talk like a hysteric, an ordinary crystal-gazer. She talked sense. That conception of a fan-shaped future is fundamental even on Earth. Many scientists accept it as sound theory."

She sat up, flushed and shaken with excitement, gripped his arm with hurtful strength.

"Take hold of your future, Rick! Mould it, build it, make it a great, towering thing that people will remember as long as they have tongues to talk about it!"

He stared at her, through her and beyond her. He began to tremble.

He rose abruptly, pacing the inlaid terrace. "My shadow," he whispered. "My shadow over Mars."

Mayo straightened slowly, watching him. An odd look came into her face—a faint, uncertain fear.

"Why not?" he repeated. "Fallon, St. John, Storm—why not me? Take hold of my future. Sure. My future, and a world. A whole world just waiting for somebody to pick it up. Some guy's hand will grab it. Why not mine!"

Silence, with the marble vault still echoing.

"Rick!" Mayo whispered.

He only half saw her. "You know who I am?" he said slowly. "Richard Gunn Urquhart." He pronounced it as though it had a tremendous cabalistic meaning. "I never realized that before. I guess I never really knew I was alive."

He threw back his head and laughed.

Silence, and the ringing echoes. The sunlight faded from the windows. Mayo sat on the heap of furs and bright silks, unstirring.

He knelt beside her and took her in his arms.

"We'll go up together," he said. "You're the woman I need—a strong woman, to go beside me like a sword. Together, Mayo! And I'll give you Mars to wear on a chain around your neck!"

He kissed her. Her lips were cold and unresponsive, and there was a bitterness

on them, a taste of tears.

He drew back, suddenly chilled. "What's the matter?"

SHE looked up at him. Tears welled and ran down her cheeks, shining palely in the dying light. She was not sobbing. There was an emotion within her too deep for sobs.

"I love you, Rick," she told him.

"Sure. And I love you."

"No. There's no love in you, Rick. Not the kind of love I mean. Part of you has come awake—the sleeping thing the old woman saw and was afraid of—your strength. But it hasn't any soul."

His eyelids narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I thought you were the man we needed, just as Kyra did. A strong man, to bring life to a dying world. But you don't even know what we're talking about. You'll bring death, Rick. Death and destruction, if you live."

He released her slowly and stood up. "I don't get it. You wanted me to take Mars, didn't you?"

"I wanted you to save Mars. To build, to restore, to create."

"Have I said I wouldn't?"

"Will you?"

He tried to hold her gaze and then turned away irritably. "Bosh! Give me time! I haven't even started to think yet."

"Will you give Hugh his chance to work, as he's dreamed of working?"

He turned on her, with a look of feral ugliness.

"Listen Mayo. I've never worn anybody's collar. I'm not making any promises, or any guesses. I don't know how anything's going to shape up. But whatever I build I'll build in my own way, on my own plans." He swore furiously. "If that isn't just like a dame! For the first time I realize what a chance this offers. After a lifetime of taking the boot from the guys higher up, I see a way to maybe get a little higher than anybody else. And right away you start tying my hands, shutting gates on me!"

He went over to the rail and stood scowling at the sand below. Then he came back.

"All right, I'll be honest with you. All this is a pretty new idea, though I guess I've been thinking about it in the back of my mind ever since the old woman said that. But I don't give a hang for Mars, or the Martians, or Hugh St. John. I do care about Richard Urquhart, and it's good that I do because nobody else does or ever has. I want two things—to pay Storm and Fallon back what I owe them and to see what I can make for myself out of a world nobody else can handle. You got that?"

She nodded.

"Yes, Rick I've got it."

HE WATCHED her silently. Then he laughed.

"All this rowing, when I'll maybe be dead in a couple of days anyhow!" He dropped down beside her. "Look, Mayo. We found each other. We'll always belong to each other, because two people can't go through what we did without fusing a part of them together. But there's more than that with us. We don't know each other yet, and there's lots of ways we won't agree. But somewhere, somehow, we click, and that's the important thing. I never felt that way with anybody else. It's as though a part of me had been missing, and suddenly it just slipped into place."

He stared at her with a sort of comic wonderment. "Hey! You know you're the first dame I ever stopped to explain to? Anybody else, man or woman, until a couple of minutes ago, would have got their teeth slapped in!"

Mayo laughed suddenly, a shaken sort of laughter that ended in a sob. She put her arms around him.

"You're just a kid, Rick," she said. "You never grew up." She drew his head down. "Maybe," she whispered. "There is a soul there somewhere. Maybe it just needs love to wake it up."

Their lips met. And then, in the dim silence, the brazen doors crashed open.

VI

UP ABOVE, the little racing moons seemed close, frighteningly close against the starshot sky. The wind cut like a knife. Rick lay motionless in the cradle of broad straps and watched four pairs of wings beat the night above him, at the ends of four stout ropes.

Off to his right Mayo McCall lay in a similar cradle, carried by four more of the little men of Caer Hebra.

The Mars landscape slid by silently, far below. There were endless reaches of sand, flowing under the restless wind and the shadows, chains of mountain peaks, worn blunt by the feet of uncounted millennia, and the desolate wastes of the sea-bottoms. Here and there a marble city gleamed under the moons, like the face of a dead woman half concealed by vines and creeping verdure.

Presently, far off to one side, Rick saw the sprawling blaze of the Terran Exploitations Company. The winged men began to drop in a long arc, and then the towers of Ruh lifted darkly into the night sky.

Jagged fingers of stone shot up as though to grasp them. Rick's heart stuck in his throat. Blurred light and shadow flickered past him, carved monsters brushed his flesh—and then, with no more than a slight jar, he was lying on a broad terrace, with Mayo not far off. Killed warriors stood with drawn swords in the shadows. The men of Caer Hebra folded their wings and bowed with the easy grace of men who give respect, but not servility.

The man they bowed to was lean and sinewy, harnessed in the worn leather of a common soldier. A wolf-faced man, with eyes that caught the moonlight in points of brilliant greenish flame.

"Loose their feet," he said.

He gave Mayo one slow look that sent the blood up into her face, and then turned to Rick. He watched while the Earthman got to his feet, his chained hands clasped in front of him.

Rick waited, not speaking. His eyes had the same remote and deadly look of a captive tiger.

After a long time the lean man laughed softly and nodded.

"I am Beudach," he said, as one speaking to an equal. "My master waits."

He bowed ceremoniously to the men of Caer Hebra and motioned them to precede him.

The guards closed in. Mayo moved close to Rick. Her hands were bound, but their elbows touched.

They followed Beudach into the tower. No one noticed the shadow sliding down the moonlight on silent mothwings; a small shadow that swooped in and clung trembling to a stone gargoyle, hidden in heavy darkness.

Far below in the deserted streets of Ruh, a man walked restlessly. A huge man clad in black, whose boot-heels struck the worn stones in uneven rhythm. He walked alone. Men watched him from behind locked shutters, but no one moved to touch him. The polished butts of twin blasters glinted on his lean hips. His course was aimless, his expression strangely remote.

Quite suddenly he stopped. He raised his head slowly, turning a bit where he stood, like a hound questing.

His black eyes lifted to the towers of the King City. The light of the twin moons caught in them and burned, a phosphorescent green. Then he smiled and limped swiftly away toward the city wall. . . .

The throne room blazed with an extravagance of torches behind bronze-shuttered windows. Smoke hung in a blue haze under the carved vault. Through it faded banners and tarnished shields caught the shaking light in glints of dull crimson, purple and gold.

Twelve men sat around the blood-red table, war chiefs from the twelve principal city-states that owed homage to Ruh. The boy-king Haral was in his high seat, and his dark, worn mother sat at his left, watching them all with bitter rage.

THE hall was still when Beudach came in with guests, guards and prisoners. But Rick, looking at their proud, sullen faces, knew that there had been trouble a moment before—high tempers, with words to match them. Jealousy was here—the scramble for precedence. They were fighting for that, before they thought of the battle of Mars.

Beudach took his post at Haral's right. The men of Caer Hebra bowed and moved to places at the table. Rick and Mayo were left alone before the high seat, the guards withdrawn somewhat behind them.

From a dense patch of shadow near Haral's feet came a quick harsh sigh, like the hiss of a coiling snake. Llaw the dwarf moved out into the torchlight, smiling.

Rick faced them all, erect and easy, his elbow touching Mayo. His hard face was impassive. Inside, he was tense.

"You know why you are here?" Haral inquired.

"I do."

The boy-king stood up. He trembled with excitement.

"You men!" he cried. "You fighting men of Mars! Here is the Earthman of the prophecy. Through him alone can the invaders gain dominion over our world."

He flung out his hand. The gesture was theatrical. It might have been funny. It wasn't. There was a great blazing dignity in the boy. Rick nodded to himself with a reluctant admiration.

Haral's voice rang like a silver trumpet. "Look at him, you men of Mars! Tonight we stand at the crossroads. Tomorrow there will be only one highway, leading straight to victory—and freedom for Mars!"

A shout went up, and on the heels of it Parras the seer stepped out of the shadows behind the high seat.

"Lord," he said. "I must tell you this again. I have sent my mind into the future, and I have seen a third road. A black road, Llaw, not far ahead. I can only say—be quick!"

Haral laughed. He was young. Very young. "We have destiny by the throat tonight, Parras!" He turned to the dwarf. "The debt is yours, Llaw. And according to the blood right, you can choose your own way to collect it. There is the Earthman. See that he pays!"

The dwarf leaped down from the dais, silently, with the deadly grace of a cat pouncing.

"Wait a minute!" said Rick.

Beudach's wolfish eyes flickered with disappointment. Haral stared at Rick in wonder. "Would you plead for your life?" Haral asked.

Rick laughed. "That would do me plenty of good, wouldn't it! No." He nodded to Mayo. "It's about this girl."

Haral frowned, almost as though he hadn't noticed her before.

"I want her turned loose, not touched," Rick said. "You have nothing against her."

Beudach was not disappointed now. He was pleased.

"Lord, she is his mate," Llaw said.

Rick ignored him. "We met in a tight spot, and got out of it together. She hardly knows me." He didn't look, but he hoped she wasn't blushing.

"It's not important now," Haral answered. "Llaw!"

Rick opened his mouth angrily. Llaw gestured. The guards moved in. Rick shut his teeth together, leaving them bare, and shoved Mayo carefully out of the way.

He put three men down with his shackle chain and two more with his feet before somebody slammed the flat of a sword blade down across his temple. He felt two more blows before the darkness closed in. Through the last of the light he saw Beudach's face set in an expression of disgust. Beudach was looking at Llaw. . . .

WHEN Rick again regained consciousness, there were jagged streaks of crimson across the black. Somewhere far off a woman was screaming. It was not a fear-scream, or hysteria; it was

the angry shriek of a clawed animal.

Rick opened his eyes.

Red waving curtains hid the throne room. There was movement beyond them, distant and unreal. The shrieking came from beyond the curtains, and a swinging clash of hammers on metal that seemed very close.

Presently he realized that the redness was pain, pain so intense that he could almost see it.

It seemed to him that he was high up, very high, looking down upon the crimson, hazy-sea.

The screaming stopped.

There was darkness again for a period of time. When it lifted he could hear only a sort of uneasy mutter. The pain had shifted, for his mind had slipped free into dimensions where it was aware of the pain, but was disconnected from it. He opened his eyes again.

His head was hanging forward. He saw his own body, erect, stripped naked, shining with sweat like polished bronze, streaked with blood. His feet rested on a transverse ornamental beam of some dark blue wood, cracked and darkened by age. The hilts of two heavy daggers stood up through his arches. The daggers were bright in the torchlight. Very bright.

Far below him was the stone floor.

Slowly he turned his head. It was heavy and took a long time to turn. He saw his left arm stretched out against the wall. The fingers of his hand were curled laxly around the hilt of a third dagger, driven through his palm into a crack between two blocks of stone.

He knew without looking that it was the same on his right. He let his head drop forward again.

Mayo knelt on the stones. Her face was turned up to him. He smiled.

Llaw the dwarf crouched, hugging his knees, almost in the attitude of a man worshipping. He was alone. His gaze fixed on Rick, unwinking, burning with a deep, insane light.

Back further, the twelve war-chiefs and the men of Caer Hebra sat at the

blood-red table, drinking, talking low in a desultory way. They avoided each other's eyes and did not look up. Haral slumped in the high seat, staring at the rug of virgin's hair. His face was white, sick. Beside him the Queen-Mother sat unmoved, watching the man on the wall. To her he was not human, not worthy of the sympathy she would have given to a beast. He was an Earthman.

Beudach rose suddenly from the dais. His face held a cold fury and his hands twitched over his dagger hilt.

"By the gods of my people!" he snarled explosively. "Isn't this enough?"

Llaw smiled faintly. He didn't move. Parras spoke out of the shadows.

"Lord, I beg you," he said. "Finish this!"

Haral raised his head, carefully not looking at Rick. "Llaw?"

"By the blood right, Majesty," said Llaw softly. "This is my choice."

Haral fell back on his high seat.

Beudach stared upward. His eyes met Rick's dark amber gaze, and gradually a silence came over the hall so that the slow splashing of blood-drops onto the stone floor was clearly audible.

"I am ashamed," said Beudach. "For my people I am ashamed."

He turned suddenly, moved forward, set his foot under Llaw's chin and threw him flat. Then he drew his dagger.

"Blood right or not, Earthman, you deserve a man's death!" he cried. His hands swept back for the throw.

Llaw yowled like a mad cat and flung himself at Beudach, incredibly swift. Beudach staggered. The knife whirled, glittering, through the torchlight, struck wide, and dropped clanging onto the stones. Beudach snarled and got his hands around Llaw's throat.

Suddenly, out in the vaulted halls beyond the bronze doors of the throne room, a man screamed. And as though that sound were the trigger, a perfect fury of noise burst out.

Every man in the throne room came to his feet. No one spoke. Blades flashed out of scabbards. Beudach raised his

head, and between his wide-spread feet the heels of the dwarf drummed a diminishing tattoo and were silent.

Beudach dropped the body. He didn't look at it. He went to Haral, drawing the sword that hung behind his shoulder.

Mayo was standing now, pressed against the wall. By stretching her bound hands high she could reach Rick's feet, but not the dagger hilts. She looked up into his face. She tried to speak, but nothing would come. His sweat and blood dropped onto her white skin, shining in the red glare.

Rick's lips formed the words, "I love you." He smiled. And then the bronze doors crashed open and Jaffa Storm was standing there, with his Venusians and the black anthropoids crowding in behind him.

VII

FULLY conscious, Rick watched from the high wall. His mind was clear, detached, perfectly sane. But in his eyes, in his face, something had changed. It was like the chilling and tempering of the weapon from the soft hot steel. Never again would he be careless and happy-go-lucky.

He watched the Martians fight and go down under the blasters of Storm's men. Guards came. The hall was choked with warriors. The huge white-haired Venusians, the blasters, and the black apes cut them down.

From outside, in the halls and the streets beyond, from over the whole city, rose an animal howl, mingled with the thunder of fighting and the saw-edged whine of Banning shockers.

In the throne room, one by one, the torches were trampled out.

After a time there was silence. In the darkness of tattered flags and forgotten glories, one torch still burned in a high sconce, spilling a red and shaken light over the man pinned by knives against the stone wall. The Venusians and the apes withdrew, taking their

dead. Outside, fighting still continued, but the sound of it was distant, muffled. Mayo had not moved from the place where she pressed close against the wall, touching Rick's feet.

Jaffa Storm came and stood before them.

He looked upward for a long while without speaking. Then he smiled and stretched his giant body, muscle by muscle, as a panther does. His black eyes held a deep pleasure.

"*The wind is rising,*" he quoted softly. "Bah! it's blown itself out! These men were the leaders of Mars. What's left—a few barbarians and the Thinkers of the Pole—are nothing." He laughed quietly. "I knew they were there. I knew you were here. I have as much knowledge as their seers. Perhaps more."

Mayo had slid silently to her knees, her bound hands on the shadowy floor.

Storm studied Rick. "There was some prophecy, wasn't there? And a blood debt." He nodded. "You've caused me a lot of trouble, Rick. That stone hurt. You made me look foolish when you got away, and you inspired a lot more men to try it. Besides, there was something—else."

Rick laughed, a harsh whisper of sound.

"That's true. I saw you take the boot from a girl."

Storm nodded. He leaned over and caught Mayo by the shoulder.

She came up fast. She had Beudach's knife in her hands. Storm let his breath out, hard. There was a blur of motion and sound. The dagger rang on the stones and Mayo was lifted in Storm's arms.

"You're a strong man, Rick. You'll live for quite a while. I don't think anyone will come here just yet—there's no one left in the King City, and they're still busy down below—and if anyone does, I don't think they'll take you down."

"Such an idea pleases you, doesn't it," sneered Rick.

Again Storm laughed. "It does," he

said. "You were to rule Mars, weren't you, according to the prophecy? They cling to the belief of the fan-shaped future, the infinite roads. Somewhere, Rick, you took the wrong turning!"

He went away. Rick watched the warm sheen of torchlight in Mayo's hair as far as he could see it, and then listened to the limping thread of Storm's boots fading down the hall.

He was alone.

He tried, once, to see if he could move the blades that pinned him. After that he hung motionless, breathing in deep, harsh sighs.

Presently, somewhere in the dimness, something stirred.

It was Beudach, dragging himself from under a heap of bodies by the high seat. He crawled among them on his hands and knees, searching the faces. Save for his labored breathing, he made no sound, not even when he found what he sought.

IN THE guttering torchlight, Rick saw the ivory gleam of Haral's body as Beudach raised it in his arms. Rising slowly to his feet Beudach walked, erect and without swaying, to the dais and laid the boy in the high seat, his dark head propped against the carved back, his hands along the arm rests. The red light caught in his open eyes, and on the worn bosses of his collar.

Beudach found a sword and laid it across Haral's knees. Then he sank down on the dais.

After a while he raised his head and looked at Rick. There was a light of prophecy in his eyes.

"You will not die," he panted, solemnly.

In a whisper, fully as hoarse, the man on the wall answered, "No."

"You will rule Mars."

"I—will—rule—Mars!"

Silence. Presently Beudach nodded.

"For good or ill, the road is taken.

And you're a man."

"Beudach," Rick said.

"Yes?"

"With my own hands, Beudach—my own hands!"

Beudach looked from Rick to the dead boy and back again. He smiled. Then he let himself down from the dais and began to crawl slowly and painfully across the floor toward Rick.

Suddenly he stopped.

"Someone's coming," he muttered.

Out in the darkness of the corridor there was a soft rustle of movement, and then a faint scream—shocked and strangled.

"Rick! Rick!"

The quick silken rustle of wings in the dusk, and then Kyra was clinging to the carved stones beside Rick, her great eyes wide, stunned, and tearless.

"I followed them, Rick," she whimpered. "I thought maybe there'd be something, something I could do to help you. Oh, Rick."

He smiled at her. "You can, baby." His speech was slow and thick. "You can pull out these knives."

Her tiny face whitened, but she nodded. From the floor Beudach spoke.

"Wait. He'll fall. The ladders are still here. Help me."

She fluttered down. Between them they raised one of the light metal ladders that had been used to get Rick up there.

Very, very slowly Beudach climbed it and pulled the daggers from the Earthman's feet.

After that, Rick was only partly conscious when they pulled the blades from his hands. He knew that Kyra's wings beat rapidly as she held him up. He sensed Beudach's wiry, dogged strength. He tried to help them, but there was a coldness on him, and a roaring in his ears.

PRESENTLY there was a hot sting of wine in his throat. He lay propped against the wall at the foot of the ladder. Beudach crouched beside him with a goblet. Shaking with exhaustion, Kyra was binding strips of cloth around his hands and feet.

Beudach dropped the goblet. There was a cold sweat on his face. He raised something from the floor beside him.

The iron Collar of Ruh.

"Listen, Earthman. Our time is finished. Whatever time to be on Mars will be new, and different. And it will be your time.

He stopped to fight for breath.

"This collar is the symbol of kingship over half of Mars. Where Ruh and the Collar lead, Mars follows. I'm going to put it on your neck. There's a hidden blade in the lock. Only one or two men in each generation know the secret, and when anyone else tampers with it he gets his death from the poison on that blade, and the lock stays locked. The Collar will be your key to the loyalty of Martians. What you do with that loyalty will bring your own destiny upon you."

He stopped again. Rick whispered.

"Why do you give me the Collar?" Rick whispered.

"Because that's the way the road leads. Because you will destroy the Company, and the men of the Company. Because there is no Martian left with strength to wear the Collar—now. Things may not be that way always, but the future will have to take care of its own."

He placed the iron collar around Rick's throat. It was still faintly warm from Haral's young flesh.

Beudach looked a long time into Rick's cold fathomless yellow eyes. Once his hand moved, almost as though to take the Collar back. Then he closed the lock.

"There's a secret passage leading to safety out of this place," Beudach went on. "Press the sixteenth boss to the left of the main hall, up, then down. More than one lord of Ruh has gone that way to safety. And hurry!" He looked once more at Rick. "Remember, Earthman—that collar won't save your life if you betray it."

Rick's eyes held no emotion.

Kyra fluttered away to find the sixteenth boss. Beudach crawled to the dais. He leaned his shoulders against

the right side of the high seat.

Kyra came back. She took hold of Rick, half dragging, half carrying him to a narrow black rectangle in the wall.

Beudach sighed. Slowly, as though he were settling down to sleep, he fell sideways and lay still, with his head on Haral's feet.

Then came a grating sound as Kyra sealed the secret passage with a block of stone, and cold dry black closed around Rick. . . .

MANY hours later, the glassite-walled office on the top floor of the Company's Administration pylon, Jaffa Storm was sprawled lazily on a couch, smoking. He did not appear to be paying much attention to Ed Fallon.

Fallon was moving with short angry strides up and down in front of the desk. His blocky face was ugly.

"Blast it all!" he burst out finally. "To pull a stunt like that over some dame was reckless folly. Do you know how many men you got killed?"

Storm shrugged. "They were Venusians. They like to die fighting. I've got more coming."

"Sure, that's easy. But what about the Martians you left dead all over the streets? You fool! Don't you realize it may get us kicked straight off the planet?"

Storm's eyebrows went up derisively. "Who'll do the kicking?"

"The Martian Planetary Government will complain to Earth, and the Interplanetary Co-ordination Authority!"

"You don't say?" Storm sat up. His black eyes were remote and faintly contemptuous. "I've already lodged a complaint with the MPG. It won't go any further."

Fallon stood still. His eyes grew narrow.

"They had two Earthlings prisoner, didn't they?" Storm went on. "One a woman, and both employees of the Company. They pinned the man up on the wall with knives, didn't they? The devil only knows what they were going to do

with the woman. All right. We had to rescue them, didn't we? And where could we go for legal protection? Besides, we have evidence the Marshies were getting ready for a massacre. The Planetary Government doesn't want trouble, Fallon. They've got nothing to back up their trouble with."

He laughed. "Along with the complaint I sent a big fat check to be used on one of their restoration schemes!"

Fallon smiled without humor. "Clever kid. And what about Ruh? What about all the Marshies this side of Kahora? How are they going to feel about you blasting their king and their top men to Kingdom Come?"

"They can feel any way they want to," said Storm evenly. "I've got blasters. I've got a ring of Bannings around the walls, and plenty of Venusians, with more coming. There's no law on Mars but strength—and I've got that, too."

There was a new and insolent note in Storm's voice which worried Fallon. He turned back to the desk and sat down.

"All right, Storm," he said. "Maybe you're so smart you can get away with it."

"You bet I can get away with it. Listen, Fallon! Those men in the throne room were plotting to get your scalp. We'd have had to fight them sooner or later. I preferred it sooner."

"You preferred it. Yeah. You use my men and equipment, you risk my company and everything I've put into this dustball of a planet, just because you have a personal grudge to satisfy. And all of it without saying a word to me. Maybe you think you'd be better off running this show."

Storm's gaze slid speculatively over Fallon.

"You've got it so it practically runs itself." He leaned over and crushed out his cigarette. He went on casually, "You're getting flabby, Ed. Physically, I mean. You're turning into a typical tycoon, the guy who sits behind the desk and grows a veranda, and only gets a kick out of doing tricks with his brain.

I've watched you, when I've had to take some of these tough boys to the wall. You don't like it, Ed. It makes you sick. What happened in Ruh made you sick, and you were so scared you almost passed out. You're getting old, Ed, beginning to slow down and get cautious. I've put over the first blow, but there'll be other blows. Other companies, hijacking, throat-cutting, all the rest of it. Mars isn't a world you can afford to get old on, Ed."

Fallon sucked his breath in, softly. "You're a liar, Jaffa."

"Take it any way you want," retorted Storm.

"I'll take it the way you mean it. You want the Company for yourself."

"The Company means Mars, Ed. I want Mars!"

FALLON nodded. He did not seem particularly surprised. He let his red head drop forward, crumpling slightly upon himself where he sat.

His movement, when it came, was very quick. Jaffa Storm was a little quicker. The blaster echoes faded quickly into the sound-proofing. There was a seared spot on a pillow next to Storm's head. Fallon still sat behind the desk. He had now neither a face nor any further interest in the future of his Company.

Storm rose and limped over to the telescreen. He called Vargo and gave instructions. Then he went out, fastening the door behind him.

A few movements later he let himself into a locked apartment in another part of the compound.

Mayo McCall rose from the couch where she had been lying and stood back against the wall. She did not tremble or cry or become hysterical. She said nothing. There was something deadly in her brown eyes.

Storm smiled and sat down. He admired her frankly. Her clothing had been brought to her from her old quarters. In place of the ragged coverall, she was wearing a simple draped tunic of

dull bronze cloth that made her hair look like fire. The cut of the garment emphasized the supple magnificence of body that the coverall had only hinted at.

"I've taken over the Company," Storm said quietly.

Her brows rose slightly. She watched him, speechlessly.

"Don't you want to know what I'm going to do with you?" asked Storm.

"Does it matter?"

"Maybe. Because I'm not going to do anything."

She stared at him.

"Well, perhaps I should say anything—for a while." He studied her for a long moment, half smiling. "You made me an offer once, Mayo."

She laughed. "Don't tell me it's still open!"

"It could be." He leaned forward. "Listen, Mayo. I own the Company, and the Company will own Mars. This is a fallow world. The ploughing of it will grow a crop of wealth and power that hasn't been known since the development of the frontier continents centuries ago on Earth—and wasn't known then, really, because they were only playing with pieces of a world."

His black eyes held a deep, smoldering heat.

"I've never seen a woman like you, Mayo. I don't know what it is. I've seen plenty of them with as much looks, maybe more. But you've got something different, something that's you. And I want it. I want it so much that I'm not going to pay off what I owe you—unless you make me. Those are the cards, Mayo. Play 'em any way you want to."

He stood up. "I've got plenty of time. I don't mind waiting. In fact, I rather like it. Just remember that I'll get what I want, one way or the other."

VIII

QUIETLY Rick lay on a shelf-bunk covered with silks and skins. There was a small window above him. Greenish

moonlight fell through it, giving shape to the tiny cell-like room. It was, ironically, almost identical with the room in which Rick had met the seeress and her blood-thirsty grandson—and the prophecy. It was hollowed in the thickness of the city wall, and from above or far below on the dead sea-bottom the window would show merely as an irregularity in the stones.

There was one door, leading into the passage that came under the streets of Ruh from the throne room. The passage branched here. Kyra, exploring cautiously, had found that it led through a balanced stone into a back street of the Thieves' Quarter.

The little hideout had been thoughtfully provisioned, evidently as a traditional duty rooted in more turbulent days of the city's history. There was clothing, food, wine, weapons and everything that was necessary to the care of wounds.

Rick held his hands up in the shaft of moonlight and flexed the fingers. Already, in the four days he had been here, the wounds had begun to heal well. It was the same with his feet. The daggers, fortunately, had been razor sharp and slid through between bone and tendon with a minimum of damage.

Rick smiled faintly. He dozed again. He had been sleeping a great deal. His body, naturally strong and toughened by the hard life he had led, was almost normal again.

Presently there was a flutter of wings outside, and Kyra pulled her tiny, lithe self through the window.

Rick woke immediately. "Did you find her?"

"Yes! Oh, Rick, she was so happy to learn you are safe. She said that only to know that was enough."

"How was she? Has Storm bothered her?"

"She's in no danger, right now," Kyra explained. "I gave her the knife. She tells you not to worry, to be careful, and—and she sends you—this!"

She placed her soft little lips against

Rick's. Then, quite suddenly, she was crying, curled against his chest. He stroked her.

"You're tired," he said. "You've done too much for me, and I've put you in too much danger. You've got to go home."

Her wings rustled sharply. "Oh, no! Rick, you need me!"

"Not that much. You saved my life, kid. Now go home, where you'll be safe."

"Rick, I can't go home! They—I don't know what they'd do to me. Besides, there isn't anything there I want, any more."

He tilted her head back. The moonlight gleamed on her young face, the slender curve of her throat.

"You know what you're saying, Kyra?" he asked her.

"I know."

"And you know what I have to say back to you."

"I know." Kyra nodded her pretty head.

"It isn't any use to tell you that this isn't love the way you think it is, and that you'll get over it."

"I won't go home, Rick. You can't make me. You can make me fly away a little, but I'll come back." She spread her wings and stood up. The moonlight made her delicate fur glisten like hot silver and touched a dim opaline fire from her wings.

"I love you, Rick, but it's more than that. I love Mars. You're going to make Mars a world where people can hope, and look forward. You don't know what it is, Rick, to be young in a dead city, with nowhere to look but back! And I want a part in the building. Even if it's just a little tiny part, to know that I've helped will be enough. You can't take that away from me."

RICK looked at her for a long moment, without speaking. A strange, stony look hardened his face briefly. An expression almost of cruelty came into his eyes as he squared his jaw. Then he shrugged.

"No, I don't suppose I can, short of

killing you," he said quietly. "All right, Kyra. We'll play it that way."

She dropped cross-legged by the low bunk, smiling, triumphant.

"Anybody around the Company see you?" Rick went on.

"No. Not any of the times I've been there."

"Learn anything more about Storm, or the defences of the place?"

"No more than I've told you. Rick, I don't think anybody would live through an attack! On our side, I mean."

"Probably not. How does Ruh look, Kyra?"

"I saw torchlight in the streets when I came back. I think there will be trouble, very soon. Oh, Rick—there was one thing I overheard while I was hiding on a roof tonight. Storm has raided the New Town twice for men, already. The pits are working on a triple shift. Men have died."

Rick nodded. "Storm's not wasting any time." He sat up, swinging his feet over the side. "Get the bandages, baby, and tie these up, tight."

She started to protest, and then went obediently to work.

"I can't wait any longer," Rick said, half to himself.

"Once they start it'll be too late, for all of us!"

The balanced stone moved silently, a few minutes later, and they stepped out wearily into a narrow rat-run, hugging the foot of the wall. It was densely shadowed, deserted except for varied smells. From somewhere ahead came a low, confused, but angry murmur.

Kyra darted off into the air and came back presently to say that there was a mob gathered in the Thieves' Market, with more people coming steadily from the better quarters of the city.

She caught Rick's arm. "They'll kill you," she whispered. "They'll tear you to pieces."

Rick smiled. It was a strange smile, without humor or humanness.

"Go on," he said. "Lead the way."

Kyra turned obediently, but her wings

trailed on the dirty stones.

They went along narrow, twisting streets between buildings so ancient that the dust of their erosion lay heaped in the sheltered corners. There was nothing human in sight, nothing but rags of washing hung bannerwise from the black windows to show that people lived there at all. But Rick could sense them, in the reeking air of the place. People among whom evil was as commonplace as breathing. Phobos had set in the east, but Deimos hung low over Ruh, so low that the towers of the King City seemed to have impaled it.

The crowd roar grew steadily louder.

There was an odd quality in it. There was fury, but it was the fury of a dirge rather than a war cry.

FINALLY they came to the end of the street. The mob roar, the mob smell, beat back at them. The tossing glare of torches blotted out the moon. They looked into a broad square, jammed solidly with people. The leaning, settling houses shouldered up around it, and here, too, were people—hanging out of windows, clinging like swarming bees to every balcony and overhand that would give them footing.

The noise burst suddenly into a great shout, and then tapered off to silence. The voice of one man rang out, thin and bitter like a trumpet call across the field of a lost battle.

Rick began to work his way forward. No one bothered to look at him.

The man stood on a scaffold in the center of the square—the gibbet where the thieves of the Quarter meted out their own justice. He was small and wiry and grizzled, dressed in the rags of a gold-mesh tunic. His face was twisted, lined with scars, his eyes a slanted reddish topaz that burned like the torch flames.

"You know why you're here," he was shrieking. "You know what has been done. You know the men who would have freed us are dead, and our young king with them."

He paused, to let the sombre snarling response of the crowd die down.

"You know," he said quietly, "what there is left for us to do."

The yell that answered him was a pure blood-cry.

"You know they have the weapons, the walls and the strength. All right! But they can't stop us. We won't come back—we know that, too—but before we die we'll wipe the Earthman's Company from the face of Mars!"

In the instant of silence before the shout, Rick raised his voice.

"Wait!" he yelled.

An angry mutter spread across the square. The little man looked down at Rick. His eyes dilated. His breath sucked in harshly, and suddenly he flung his hands out to silence the crowd.

The quiet spread out from his urgent hands, crawling across the upturned faces, lapping the walls like still water, until the snapping silken rustle of the torches sounded plainly.

Rick began to climb the steps onto the scaffold.

He went slowly, but erect and without limping. He wore a purple cloak that swept from his big shoulders to his heels, held at the breast with the symbol of the Twin Moons in burning emerald.

He walked onto the platform, under the swinging chains of the gibbet. He raised his bandaged hands to the clasp and let the cloak slip down.

No one voiced a single word. Only a breath, one huge indrawn sigh, swept from wall to wall and was silent.

Rick stood perfectly still. His supple, thick-muscled body was half bared in the plain leather harness of a soldier, and around his throat, dull and battered and worn with centuries, the Collar of Ruh gave back an iron gleam to the torches.

THE thief in the golden tunic goggled at him. "Who are you?" he asked.

Rick didn't raise his voice, but it rolled back off the walls.

"Richard Gunn Urquhart, the leader

of the prophecy."

A sort of moan rose out of the crowd, a beast cry before blood. The thief flung his arms out.

"Wait! Wait, you people!" He stepped close to Rick, his fingers curled hungrily on his dagger hilt. "How did you, an Earthman, get the Collar of Ruh!"

"Beudach himself took it from Haral's neck after the massacre and put it on mine. You know the story of the lock. You know I'm telling the truth."

"Beudach!" whispered the thief. The name ran eerily across the square, half voiced . . . Beudach . . . Beudach!

"An Earthman," said the thief. "An Earthman, with the Collar of Ruh!"

He drew his knife.

Rick's face was impassive. He didn't look at the knife. He stared out over the crowd with a steady gaze.

"Listen, you people," he said. "When Beudach locked the Collar on me, he said, 'For good or ill, the road is taken.' And This, out of all the roads Mars might have walked, is the one that came topmost on the wheel. You can't change that. Nobody can change it. They tried to. They pinned me to the throne-room wall with knives, but they couldn't change it."

His voice had a queer ring in it. Not fierce, or threatening or pleading, but as though he were so completely confident that he had stopped thinking about it, and was only rehashing what they must already know.

"I'm not an Earthman. I was born in deep space, and the Jekkara Port was the first ground I ever set my foot on. I belong to no world, and no race. I belong to myself, to give my loyalty where I will."

He waited, and then went on.

"Mars isn't lost, unless you go ahead and lose it," he said. "You will, if you tackle the Company this way. Kyra! Kyra, come here and tell them what you saw."

The sea of faces turned to watch her as she rose out of the dark street to come fluttering down beside Rick on the

scaffold. She touched him, timidly, afraid of the crowd. Rick put his hand on her gently. Then he faced the crowd again.

"The Earthman of the Company left me hanging on those knives, to die," he shouted. "It was Kyra who saved me—she and Beudach. I owe my life to Mars."

He smiled down at Kyra.

"Tell them, baby," he whispered.

She told them. "You would die," she finished, "and never touch them."

AN UNCERTAIN mutter of talk ran across the square. The thief leaned forward. His knife was still raised, but he seemed to have forgotten about it. His topaz eyes held a curious, unwilling respect.

"You," he said. "How would you do it?"

"If I tell you that, Jaffa Storm will know it almost as soon as you do. He has powers as great as your seers—stone walls don't stop his mind. How else do you think he knew your leaders were here ready to be killed. If he hadn't been so busy, and felt so safe, he'd have been back to spy on Ruh before this."

"Then we would just have to trust you," the chief said softly. He began to balance the dagger idly in his hand. "Beudach was a dying man."

"Tell them, Kyra," Rick said.

She stretched herself in the torch-flare her wings spread wide.

"Listen, you Martians," she cried out furiously. "Jaffa Storm put chains on Rick and tried to make him a slave in the mines. When Rick wouldn't submit, Storm tried to kill him. Four nights ago he left Rick hanging on the wall to die, and he took Rick's mate back with him to the Company. What more reason could a man have to want revenge?"

There was a sort of light shining out of her. Her soft young voice carried like a flute.

"Rick Urquhart will lead Mars in greatness," she told them. "He will bring life back to the dying. He will give you unity, and strength."

For a long time there was silence. Then the shout came—a crashing thunder of salute that shook the stones.

Rick turned to the thief in the golden rags.

"Keep them ready," said Rick. "It won't be long. I'll send word back by Kyra when to strike."

The thief nodded. Rick held up his hands to the crowd. He smiled, but his eyes remained cold and remote, untouched. Then just as silently and as mysteriously as they had appeared, Rick and Kyra departed. . . .

Out across the sea-bottom, in the office that had been Fallon's in the Company Administration pylon, Jaffa Storm was busy—busier than Rick dreamed. He was not doing anything physically. He was sitting perfectly still, elbows on knees, his eyes closed, and his knuckles pressed in a certain curious way against his temples. He had been in contact with Rick's mind before. Now that he had the wave-length, so to speak, it was much easier to tune in. He laughed softly when Rick made his statement about Storm's mental powers and the danger of telling the battle plan.

Storm did not move until Rick was through speaking—until he had examined the unspoken things inside the Earthman's head. Then he rose.

"A good plan," he said. "Very shrewd. It has even a fair chance of succeeding. Opposing brute force against brute force is always a gamble . . . let's see."

He flicked on a light under a sort of table of thick frosted glass, and spun a selector dial. Presently a three-dimensional full-color miniature of the Polar area—a glorified relief map—appeared.

Jaffa Storm sat down again, taking the same position. He stared at the screen, but his eyes were looking into some other place, much farther away.

IX

HUGH ST. JOHN sighed, stretched out in a long chair, and closed his eyes. "Well, that's that," he said to Eran Mak.

"The last shot in my locker, the last credit in my bank account. I'm finished."

Eran Mak said nothing. He was sitting on the balcony rail and smoking, watching the easy life of Kahora under the sunlit dome. His swarthy piratical face was shadowed and sombre with his brooding thoughts.

"I hoped maybe you, as a Martian, would have better luck," St. John said dully. "But they didn't let you get any farther than they did me."

The bells in Eran Mak's ear chimed as he shook his head. His face remained sombre.

"Well, there goes Mars. Mak, just who and what the devil are these Thinkers, that they're too blamed good to see anybody?"

"Nobody knows, really, except that they're the First Race, supposedly the original Martians, which would imply that the rest of us came from somewhere else," Mak answered. "Or else they're non-human and preceded us in evolution. I suspect they're just a bunch of smart people who liked to live in peace and comfort, and so withdrew themselves behind a wall of legend, glamor and fear."

St. John found the strength to smile at that. "What I love about you Mak, is your simple faith in everything. But these Thinkers have done a lot of good from time to time."

Mak nodded. "Sure. Theoretically at least they guide the viewpoint of Mars—when they feel like bothering. It has to be some big important split, like the inter-hemispheric war back in Sixty-Two Thousand and Seven, when the Sea Kings had trouble."

"Wouldn't you think this was important?" inquired St. John.

"I suppose," said Eran Mak quietly, "the Thinkers have aged with the rest of us."

There was a long silence. The city whispered below. Warm sunlight fell through the high dome, bringing a soft jewel lustre to the buildings of colored

plastic, a delicate shimmer to the web of walks and roadways arching between them. The air was soft, neither warm nor cool, pleasantly scented.

Eran Mak swore with a deadly calmness and got up, sending a shower of music from the bells.

"I'm going back to Jekkara, Hugh!" he growled. "I want to breathe air again, and wear something that doesn't make people look twice to see if I'm male or female. Want to come down with me?"

"Yes, thanks, I may as well." St. John looked up and laughed, rather sheepishly. "I don't know why Mars should mean anything to me. But this is like giving up hope for a friend."

He looked down at the plastic pavement. "If I only knew what happened to Mayo."

Mak put a hand on his shoulder. St. John rose and followed him inside, to start packing.

The telecreen hummed.

"The devil with it," said St. John. He went on into the bedroom. The buzzer continued to hum stridently. Presently the tempo changed to the short, insistent, "urgent" signal.

St. John swore and hit the switch. The screen flickered and cleared, showing the interior of a crude public booth, liberally scrawled, carved and initialed. The man in the booth was a stranger, big and tawny and yellow-eyed, dressed in the usual gaudy silk shirt and tight pants of a space-hand on earth-leave. His hands were bandaged.

He was not a usual space-hand. St. John suppressed a shiver of excitement.

"Hugh St. John, here," he said.

"Urquhart," answered the man. "Richard Gunn Urquhart." He pulled the bright shirt open at his throat. "You know what that is?"

Eran Mak, standing behind St. John, let his breath out in a startled curse.

"By the planets! The Collar of Ruh!"

Rick nodded. "For Mars. A united Mars. Mayo says that's what you're after."

"Mayo!" St. John gripped the edges of the screen. "Where is she? Is she all right?"

"Jaffa Storm's got her, but she's not been harmed. It's a long story, and I'll tell you later. Right now I want to know something. Do you want union enough to risk your neck for it?"

St. John drew a long breath. His eyes met Mak's briefly. "Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

"All right." Rick sketched in the details of the massacre at Ruh. "The Marshies are all set to go. The men of the New Town will be, too, when I get through with 'em. Storm has been crimping here already, and the people don't like it. But frontal attack won't be enough. Somebody's got to help us from the inside.

"If we can get Storm, the rest will be easy."

AT THAT, St. John frowned. "What about Fallon?"

"Storm killed him four days ago. Nobody but Storm and Mayo know about that, and probably the Venusian, Vargo. Do you think you can work it with Storm to get permission to land on the Company's 'copter deck?"

St. John frowned. "I don't know whether Storm has definitely connected Mayo with us or not, but I think he was always suspicious of me. I'll be honest with you. He'll probably let us land, all right, and then he'll blow us to Kingdom Come."

"You willing to try it?"

"Mayo's there—you're sure of that."

"I'm sure. I'll tell you about that, too."

"All right." St. John leaned closer.

"There's just one thing. Who the dickens are you, and what do you want of this?"

Rick held up his bandaged hands. "To get these around Jaffa Storm's throat."

The bells in Eran Mak's ear rang faintly. "I know you. You're Rick, the man Storm was trying to kill, the man who helped Mayo to get away, down there in the mines."

Rick stared past St. John at Eran Mak. "Well?"

Mak's hot golden eyes dwelt on the iron Collar. "I'm a Jekkara man myself. But if Beudach of Ruh put that on you himself, it means plenty." He shrugged, smiling. "What have we got to lose, Hugh?"

St. John's hands trembled slightly on the edges of the screen. He was still studying Rick, with an odd intentness.

"Not a thing," he said softly. "Not a blamed thing. All right, Rick. I'll fix it with Storm somehow. Then what?"

"Then fly down to the New Town. I'll be waiting, with everything set to go. And make it fast. St. John! Fast, before anything gets to Storm!"

In the meantime, Jaffa Storm had finished his mental exploration—an effort that left him exhausted, despite his physical strength. He, of all the creatures on Mars, human, semi-human and sub-human, had seen beyond the veil of mystery that hid the Polar Cities and the Thinkers who dwelt in them.

Jaffa Storm was pleased with what he saw with his mind's eye. He gave instructions to Vargo concerning the Company's defenses, and took off northward in a one-man flier. He returned less than a full day later, tired, exultant, and bearing in his arms something wrapped up in a curious shining cloth—a something that, for all its small size, bent Storm's knees with its weight. . . .

After finishing his talk with Hugh St. John, Rick walked down the main street of the New Town. It was night again. He had waited purposely until the life of the place was going full strength so none would note his coming.

Ochre dust rose in clouds from Rick's boots. The unpaved streets, marked out at random by lines of shacks and lean-tos, were crowded with men—space-hands, placer miners, homesteaders, drifters, bums, thieves, con men—and women to match. They were predominantly from Earth, but Venus, the Asteroids, and every planetary colony were also represented.

MOST of the buildings on the main street were saloons and crude copies of expensive amusement places. Dream Palaces, joints dealing in exotic drugs at cut-rate prices, a couple of three-dimensional cinemas showing films several years old, and numerous girl shows featuring, "The Exotic Beauty of a Hundred Worlds—No Miners Allowed." The noise was terrific.

Rick steered around a developing brawl in mid-street and stopped in the comparative shelter of an archway. He watched for a while. There was a tension about the crowd. An ugliness that had, as yet, no direction to it. Every man was armed, most of them with blasters.

He glanced up at the sky, measuring the distance between the two moons. He nodded and went on. Presently he turned into the swinging red plastic doors of "The Furnace—Hottest Spot on Mars." And the biggest spot in the New Town of Ruh.

A bunch of tired-looking Venusian girls were putting their polished-emerald bodies mechanically through a routine Rick had seen five years ago in Los-anglis, back on Earth. Hard-looking men, in various stages of drunkenness, leaned on the ringside tables and carried on loud one-sided conversations with them. The long bar backed up by an interplanetary array of liquors, mostly, and a cheap Florent mirror—the type that is sensitive only to the infra-red heat rays given off by living bodies, transforming them into visible reflections with interesting results—was jammed from end to end.

Rick elbowed his way in. He ordered *thil*, a potent cold-green liquid from the Jekkara Low-Canals, and sipped it, studying the mirror.

Suddenly somebody down the line let out a bellow.

"Rick! Rick Urquhart!"

The volume of other noise lessened a bit, for others nearby had been startled by the tone, and the next words rang clearly.

"My stars! I thought you was dead in the Company pits!"

At the word "Company," a brassy silence descended upon the Furnace.

Rick scanned the mirror. He saw a gangling, sinewy shape gesticulating frantically at his reflection. "Texas!" he yelled, and pulled himself up on the bar.

He was aware that he had the attention of everyone in the place, including the tired chorus girls.

He walked down the bar, past rows of mugs and glasses, reached over and pulled "Texas" up beside him. They pounded each other. Texas had a tough, good-natured face with the bones sticking through his leathery skin, bad teeth, high-heeled boots, and a liquor breath that could stand by itself. He had herded meat-animals on three planets and an asteroid, and was the closest thing to a friend Rick had found in his wanderings.

"For Pete's sake, you old shepherd-er!" yelled Texas. "I thought the crimpers got you, last time we was over in the Old Town."

"They did," answered Rick. "But I started a small riot in the mine and was lucky enough to get away." Rick's voice carried quietly all over the room. "I hear Storm's coming here for his men now."

An animal snarl from the crowd answered this last remark.

"Nobody gets away from the Company," somebody near Rick said.

"How come you managed it?"

RICK held out his wrists. "See those marks? You think I was wearing shackles for the fun of it?" He spoke to the crowd. "Yeah, I was lucky. I got away down an abandoned drift. But the others didn't. You know what they used on us. A Banning, full power. I've seen what happens to the guys the Company takes! I've lived in the barracks and sweated in the mines and had the living blazes kicked out of me, right along with them. I was lucky. Now I'm telling

you. Unless we do something about Jaffa Storm and that gang of his, we'll all die in the pits before we're through!"

"Sure," said Texas, after the noise had died down. "But Storm holds all the aces, Rick. I'd shore like to tromp his head in, but can anyone get inside to do it?"

"I can," Rick said.

He watched the men lean forward hungrily. "Listen, you guys! Maybe you know there was some trouble in the Old Town a few nights ago. Well, I was there. I saw Storm march his men in and blast down their king and a bunch of Marshie leaders. The Marshies are going to hit the Company tonight, with everything they've got. Are you going to let them have all the fun?"

He waited until he could make himself heard again.

"And I'm telling you this, too! Unless we fight along with the Marshies, we're done. And why shouldn't we? Gosh, they're human too, and we've both taken it from the Company long enough! We're going to have to fight the Company sooner or later. How long do you think the little guys like us can last on Mars, fighting Storm and the Marshies both?"

He let them think about that, for a moment.

"I've got it fixed to get inside the compound tonight," he said quietly. "I owe Jaffa Storm a big debt, and I aim to pay it off. How many of you guys want to be there when we open the gates?"

The air was full of waving fists and a great harsh roar.

"You take 'em, Tex," Rick said. "Get 'em there fast, and quiet. Keep separate from the Marshies until the fighting begins, but work with them. I got that end all fixed. Get volunteers to take up what 'copters and atomplanes there are in this dump and clean out the Bannings by the gates. Take every weapon you can scrape up, if you have to loot the warehouses—and if I don't manage to do what I'm planning to do, you and the Marshies can kick the gates down,

anyway, together!"

At the same moment Kyra had been trying to win co-operation from the Martians with but meager results. The thief in the golden rags was scowling sullenly. He was proving stubbornly antagonistic.

"Earthmen!" sneered the thief. "When men spill blood together in the same cause, it makes them brothers. Should we become brothers to them?"

The men around the table let out a yell.

"No!" they shrieked. There were five of them, representing every Quarter and class in Ruh.

Kyra beat the air impatiently with her wings.

"These Earthmen have done you no harm," she said. "They mean you no harm. They've suffered from the Company as much as you have, and they have a blood debt. By our own laws, can we deny them the right to pay it?"

The men thought about that. The thief started to say something. Kyra spoke first.

"Together, Martians and Earthmen both, we can destroy the Company. We'll have weapons, and strength. Alone, either one of us would fail. This, even if—if Rick should be killed, we can go ahead and win." She waited for a moment, and then cried out, "The Earthmen will go, whether we do or not! Will you let them have all the glory?"

The men around the table rose and howled that they would not.

"We'll fight!" they bellowed. "Down with the Company!"

X

AFTER a search Rick found St. John and Eran Mak on the 'copter field just beyond the shacks of the town.

"You fix it with Storm all right?" Rick asked.

"Yes," answered St. John. "Told him I had news from the Polar Cities—something so important to him and Falon that I was scared stiff. Don't know

whether he believed me or not."

"Doesn't matter, as long as we get there."

More time passed. Noise, movement and light died in the New Town. St. John threw down the stub of his cigarette.

"Time now, Rick?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

They climbed into the neat little flier. Eran Mak took one last look at the sky.

"The moons are right together, Rick," he said. "Favorable omen for Mars. Chance, or did you plan it that way?"

"What do you think? Shut the door for Pete's sake, and let's go!"

Because he was looking for them, Rick saw the crowds of men moving across the sea-bottom from Ruh. They went without lights, spread out widely, hugging the shadows. Rick hoped that owing to the rough terrain and the confusing moonlight they could get close to the Company walls without being spotted.

The Company compound was blazing with light, everything going full blast. While they watched, two ships went up from the port, trailing comet-tails of flame across the night. The little 'copter trembled in the air-wash the rocket-liners left behind them.

"Wait a minute!" Rick said suddenly. The others looked at him, startled. He was watching the rocket-flares. "How do I know?" he muttered. "Storm read our minds before. How do I know?" He burst without warning into a rowdy ballad about a spaceman's daughter and a lonesome comet, shoved St. John away from the controls, and took over himself. His eyes blazed with excitement.

"Have you gone crazy?" St. John snapped.

But Eran Mak studied Rick shrewdly.

"There are more things in heaven and Mars than you Earthborn people know," he said. "Telepathy, for one." He glanced quickly at the way the 'copter was heading now. "Come on, Hugh. Let's sing!"

Using the ballad as a screen for his thought, Rick shot the 'copter toward the spaceport and brought it low over a dark and deserted area on its outskirts. Then he handed the controls back to St. John.

"Storm may not have been as busy as I thought," he explained. "He may have picked my mind clean, for all I know, and set a trap for us all. Anyway, I got a better idea, and a better chance of getting by with it. Get back to the men, double quick, and tell 'em to stay way back from the Company until I'm through. Then come in swinging!"

"How will we know when you're through?"

"You'll know!"

St. John frowned, looking quickly at the spaceport. Rick's jaw hardened.

"He isn't running out, Hugh," Eran Mak said quietly. "Let's go."

"Sorry," St. John said curtly.

Rick grunted and dropped out the door, ten feet or so to the ground. The copter sped away. Rick stood still, looking around him, and then headed for the loom of a row of launching racks about a half mile away. Apparently no one had noticed the furtive landing. There was no reason why anyone should have, at that distance from the field.

FROM the small size of the racks he judged the ships cradled there were private jobs belonging to officials of the Company. That was exactly what Rick wanted. Everything was dark around them too, which meant that nobody was going anywhere just now.

Rick crawled face downward for the last few hundred yards. That was fortunate, because he avoided the electric-eye warning beams, which were set to catch a man knee-height from the ground. Presently he was in the shadow of one of the huge tilted tubes. The racket of the port itself, where men slaved to load Fallonite and unload supplies, was close to him.

The rack was not locked. There was

no reason to keep it locked. Rick slid inside, through the double-lock into the cradled ship. A nice, opulent, easy-to-handle baby, convertible for atmosphere travel. Sweating with the need for haste, Rick found a bulger in the locker and put it on. Then he strapped himself into the pilot's seat and got busy.

The thunder of the warming motors must have brought people running, but Rick didn't wait to see. He took off long before the tubes were safely heated, and once a spaceship has begun thundering there isn't much anyone can do about it.

He made a long screaming arc upward till he was clear of the thin airblanket, then he flipped over, got the motors going, and swooped back toward the Company compound. On the way he dumped fuel, watching the gauge carefully. Mayo's bungalow prison was way off from the Administration pylon, but he was taking no chances.

He came in high and pushed the ship's nose downward, aiming it like a bomb over the pylon and the north wall. Then he locked the controls, pushed the ignition wide open, and bailed out, blasting blue blazes out of the bulger-rocket to get away from there.

The force of the explosion threw him around, even so. It was beautiful. The pylon crumpled like a dropped wedding cake, and the walls flattened outward. After that everything was hidden by smoke and flying debris.

Rick smiled, his teeth glinting wolf-like in the moonlight. Then he changed his course, shooting away toward the far side of the compound where Mayo was.

On the way he saw men pouring up out of the folds and creases of the seabottom, flowing toward the breached walls. Earthmen and Martians, running together over the gray moss, blasters and slice-bars swinging beside sword-blades and the spiked knuckle-dusters of the Low-Canals. Just men, now, carrying the same hate in their hearts, charging the same barricade.

Rick nodded. "Make 'em bleed to-

gether," he thought, "and you've made brothers. For a while, at least. And a while is all I need."

He dropped down into the dark and quiet back lot of the compound, and found Mayo's bungalow from Kyra's verbal map. He climbed out of the heavy bulger, laughing at the weakness of his knees and the way his heart pounded. Excitement of the ship and the wrecking, sure. But there was more to it than that.

The bungalow was unlocked. He knew the minute he opened the door that it was empty. He went through the rooms, calling Mayo's name, and then he saw the blood on the carpet, a trail of it, fresh and wet. He turned cold, and very quiet.

He followed the erratic spatter of red drops across the paving outside, to a little shed that might have housed a 'copter, kept secretly for an emergency. The trail ended there.

Rick ran back. He yelled for Kyra, but there was no answer, though he had sent her to watch, to help Mayo escape if she could. There was a tremendous roar of fighting now, where Storm's Venusians were standing off the Terro-Martian rabble. Rick ran toward it, more slowly now because the wounds in his feet were making themselves felt. On the way he saw the prison-barracks of the work-gangs had been thrown open according to his instructions.

Things were a little confused for Rick after that. He was caught up in the fighting, but he only half saw the men he blasted down. He was looking for St. John and Eran Mak—not because he wanted them, but because he wanted their 'copter. He was thinking of Mayo and Jaffa Storm, and he was not quite sane.

BETWEEN the men of Ruh, New Town and Old, and the liberated slaves, the Company resistance was crushed, utterly. Rick's stunt with the crashing ship had almost done it alone, and without Storm to egg them on the

Venusians were weakened. It was quiet again in a surprisingly short time. At last Rick found St. John and Eran Mak standing at the edge of the enormous crater made by Rick's ship. The ruined pylon lay like a giant scrap pile over one edge. The two men were bending over a twisted metal object.

"Heaven only knows," St. John was saying. "I never saw anything like it before. But it's probably just as well we didn't have to face it."

Eran Mak touched it, shivering slightly. "It was made for death. You can feel that." He saw Rick then, started to hail him, and changed it to a startled, "What's wrong?"

"Mayo. Storm's taken her—had a 'copter hidden out. Where's yours?"

"Won't fly," said St. John briefly. "Debris hit the prop." His face was suddenly white and strained. "We'll find a telescreen and get the MPG busy right away. Also the Interplanetary authorities. He may get away from Mars, but he'll be caught when he lands." He caught Rick's look of leashed fury and flinched. "It's all we can do right now! Come on."

They found a screen in the laboratory, which was untouched by the blast. While St. John made his reports, Rick paced restlessly, limping with pain but unable to sit down. They were alone in the office, the three of them. Eran Mak leaned against the door, smoking, watching Rick with hard, speculative eyes.

St. John switched off the screen. "Now. Let's talk business," he said.

"The blazes with business," snarled Rick. "I'm interested in Mayo."

"Heaven knows I am, too. Everything's being done that can be done. There are men outside, Rick, waiting to know what we're going to make of Mars."

Rick's mouth twitched in a half smile. "They're my men. I brought 'em together, and I control them." He hit the Collar of Ruh with his knuckle. "There's no law on Mars but strength. Storm knew that, too. Now I've got the

strength. I'm willing to play along with you, unless you get under my feet too much, and I'm not going to run things the way Storm did."

"Until you have to," St. John said, "or until you feel like it. Mars is your plaything now, is that it?"

Rick's face hardened, his cold cat-gaze turned inward.

"I told Mayo I'd give her Mars to wear on a chain around her neck," he said. "I don't know what I'm going to do with it, yet, aside from that. Whatever looks the best to me. But the devil with Mars, and you, too!" He limped over to the screen, reaching for the switch. "Maybe I can get a 'copter from the field."

He heard Eran Mak's bells chiming faintly, and then in a sudden jangle of music. He turned around. The wounds in his hands and feet made him clumsy, but even so his blaster was almost drawn when Eran Mak took him across the temple with the heavy barrel of his own weapon. Rick sagged to the floor and lay still.

St. John licked his lips. "You shouldn't have done that, Mak," he said hoarsely.

"Why not?" The Martian was perfectly composed, tying Rick with brisk efficiency. "That boy is as irresponsible as a child and about as safe to play with as a tiger. Think for yourself what Mars will be like in five years, under his rule."

St. John nodded slowly. "A barbarian emperor has never brought anything except war and cruelty. But without Rick we'd never have won."

"No. But he did that for himself. Not for you, nor me, nor Mars." Mak rose and stood scowling at Rick, swinging the bells back and forth with his fingertip. "What to do with him is the sticker. I don't want to kill him, and there is his personal following to think about. That cursed Collar!" Mak snapped his fingers suddenly. "Get me some acid out of the lab. I can get the lock open with that. Without the Collar, Rick is nothing to the Martians, and if we tell the Earthmen that Rick ran out on them

with several million credits of the Company funds, it'll finish him for good."

"That's dirty, Mak!" St. John protested.

"Sometimes," said the Martian patiently, "a dirty blow wins a clean fight. Think of Mars, not Richard Gunn Urquhart. Go on, Hugh! Move!"

Hugh St. John moved.

XI

IT TOOK Richard Gunn Urquhart a long time to collect himself. He came to slowly, in a series of mental jerks. From that and the pendulum sensation in his head and the dead-frog taste in his mouth, he knew he'd been drugged with *tsamo*, a Martian narcotic.

The roof over him, when he could see it, turned out to be the ceiling of a spaceship's cabin. Through long training, Rick's subconscious did a quick weighing and sorting of the sounds filtering in from outside. The ship was in port, lading, and not yet cradled.

He felt shaky. He was in no rush to wake up—until he discovered that his right wrist was manacled to the bunk stanchion. After that, things began to come back to him. The *tsamo* made him stupid. Connected thinking brought the sweat of physical effort to his skin, but finally he had the pieces put together. He sat up, yelling, shaken and blazing-eyed with fury—and desperation.

No one answered. The cabin door was closed, and he was alone. He fought the cuff-chain for a while, gave it up, and subsided into a quietness that had nothing of peace in it.

He saw the letter, propped on the table beside the head of his bunk.

It was addressed to him. He tore it open and read:

Rick—

This is admittedly a dirty trick, but you left us no choice. The future of a world was more important than you, or us; so—

Fifty thousand credits have been placed to your account in the New York Main Office of the First Interplanetary Bank of Earth. Perhaps that will help to poultice the bump on your head. Don't try to come

back to Mars. Both Martians and Terrans have been given a slanderous but logical account of your actions and will probably shoot you on sight. Moreover, as you said, there is no law on Mars but strength—and now we have the strength. Be sensible, and keep your head where it will be of use to you.

Eran Mak.

There was also a postscript:

Don't worry about Mayo. We're moving heaven and Mars to help her.

Rick's lips pulled back from his teeth in a snarl. He crumpled the letter and threw it away. Quite suddenly he was violently sick. He lay quiet for a while, cold yet dripping sweat. The dulled racket of loading flowed past his ears, engines, winches, men yelling, the thump and crash of heavy loads.

He pulled himself up and began bel-lowing again.

PRESENTLY a boy came in, carrying a tray. He was like a million ship's boys on the Triangle. His ragged socks flapped loosely on his ankles and his face had a look of habitual wariness, like that of a hunted but vicious animal. He set the tray down, keeping out of Rick's reach.

"Where am I?" Rick asked.

"Jekkara Port." The kid studied him, obviously impressed by Rick's size and mature toughness.

"What ship?"

"The *Mary Ellen Dow*, outbound for Earth. We take off in three-four hours."

Despite the handcuff, Rick stood up. "That means they start cradling in just a few minutes, and after that I'm stuck! Get me the skipper."

"Not a chance. No one ain't comin' in here but me, till after take-off. That's orders. 'Sides, they're busy." The boy turned toward the door again, but his attention lingered on Rick's bandaged, big brown hand.

Rick relaxed. He pointed to a purple bruise under the kid's eye and grinned. "I see you got some battle scars, too. Over a dame, I'll bet."

It was no dame; the cook had a hang-

over. But the kid expanded with pride.

"Yeah," he said. "Some dish, too. Happened at Madame Kan's. Ever been there?"

"You bet. Best place on Mars."

"It's okay," said the kid condescendingly. "But I don't like these Martian babes much. Too skinny."

"That's right. Bad tempered, too." Rick winced. "Golly, what a head I got! Who doped me?"

"I dunno. You was out cold when they carried you in. That was three days ago. You musta taken a deep breath, all right!"

"I guess so." That wasn't hard to figure. Eran Mak had knocked him out and kept him that way with drugs. It must have been Eran Mak, then, who had taken the Collar of Ruh. Rick gave the boy a look of intimate intentness. "Kick that door shut and come over here. I want to talk to you."

"I ain't got the key to that cuff on me."

"I know that. Listen, pick up that letter and read it."

The boy obeyed, warily. His eyes began to bulge. "Fifty thousand credits!" he said hoarsely. "My stars!"

"You could buy Madame Kan's, with that."

"No," said the kid softly. He was looking way off somewhere, and his face had changed. "No. I'd get my master's ticket and then I'd buy my own ship—or part of it. A ship that would maybe go out—clear out to The Belt and even Jupiter."

"You can have it, kid."

The boy turned around and looked at him. His mouth twisted sullenly. He started to go out.

"I mean it," Rick said. "Listen, you fuzz-tailed sap! I'm playing for something bigger than fifty thousand measly credits. If I don't get off this ship before she starts cradling, I'll lose something plenty important. I'm offering to buy the key to this handcuff for fifty thousand credits."

The kid stared at him. He tried three

times before he could get the words out. "Ain't got the key."

"I've been a ship's boy myself. You can get it."

The kid ran his hands through his hair and across his face. He seemed to have trouble breathing. "I ain't fallin' for no bunk like that!" he cried out suddenly. "I'll get eight bells beat out of me for lettin' you go, and that's all I'll get."

"Gimme that letter." Rick went through his pockets and found a stub of pencil. The boy tossed the wadded paper on the bunk, still not coming close. "What's your name?"

"Yancey, William Lee Yancey — Y-A-N-C-E-Y," he added for good measure.

Rick smoothed out the letter and wrote carefully on the back of it. Then he tossed it back. The kid read it, eyes bugging.

To whom it may concern. William Lee Yancey has done a job for me worth fifty thousand credits. My account in the First Interplanetary Bank of Earth, New York Main Office (see other side), is to go to William Yancey.

Richard Gunn Urquhart.

A slow, hot glow came into the boy's eyes. He rolled the paper tight and hid it on him.

"Wait," he said, and went out.

RICK waited. He waited a thousand years, and his heart wore a hole through his ribs. He stared at the cabin wall, but all he could see was Mayo's face the last time he remembered it, with the sweat and blood of his impalement glistening, jewel-like, on the white skin, and the dark eyes full of sorrow and terror and love.

The kid came back, and he had the key.

"Swiped it out of the skipper's extra pants," he grinned. "They're hookin' the tugs on. We got to hurry."

Rick could hear the powerful electromagnets of the roaring tugs clamping onto the ship, ready to wrestle her into her launching cradle. The job would

take several hours, but after it was started there was no way on or off.

The lock clicked. Rick flung the cuff off and they went to the door. There was no one in the corridor. Officers were on the bridge, crew strapped into their launching hammocks. Sometimes the cradling was tougher on the crew than the take-off.

The warning bell rang through the ship. Airlocks were already shut. The boy pulled Rick's sleeve. "Waste chute," he said. "This way." They ran. Rick's feet were still stiff and sore, but he could use them all right.

They found the chute, slid in, and let the compressed air blow them gently out. The tugs made a deafening clamor, heaving and straining to shift the huge bulk. Nobody noticed the two men running from the shadows under the hull of the Mary Ellen Dow. It was not quite dawn, with Deimos dying in the western sky and the sun not yet born in the east.

Rick paused in the shelter of a towering empty cradle, and saw that the boy had disappeared. Rick smiled crookedly.

"Didn't trust me not to clip him and take my letter back," he thought. "Yeah. Well, he's smart, at that."

He promptly forgot the kid and the fifty thousand credits in deciding what was the safest and quickest way to steal a 'copter. In his spaceman's dress he could get by all right unless Eran Mak and St. John had plastered his description around too much on the telescreen. Finally he shrugged. That was a chance he'd have to take.

He walked on, erect and not too fast, acting as though he belonged there. He stopped only once, to pick up a piece of heavy scrap fitted nicely into his curled-up fingers. There was about him a cold, withdrawn look—a look of ruthless concentration.

The 'copter field was a good mile and a half from the rocket field. Jeeps sped back and forth between them and the huge warehouses, sheds and repair shops. Even at this early hour Jekkara Port was awake and hustling. Before

long, one of the jeeps slowed down and the driver offered Rick a lift.

Refusal would have been more dangerous than acceptance—spacemen never walk if they can help it. Rick climbed aboard.

The driver, an indistinct dark shape in the gloom, talked as he sent the little car bucketing across toward the 'copter field.

"You just in, pal?"

"Yeah."

"Then you ain't heard the news, I guess."

"No."

"Well, the Terran Exploitations Company has had the blinking stuffings knocked out of it. Some of our guys finally got smart and took the law in their own hands. Looked like for a while the Company was gonna own the whole cussed planet, but now us little guys are gonna have a look-in. Swell deal, all around. This new government they're putting together is all right."

He burst into sudden laughter. "Only thing is, we got to get in harness with the Marshies. Well, it's their world—and if they let me pick my own, I won't mind!"

"Yeah," said Rick. "That's fine."

"Suits me." The light was getting stronger now, with the suddenness of Martian dawns. "Funny thing about that Urquhart bird, though. Rick, they call him. Fed everybody a lot of pious bunk about the future of Mars. Got the fight going, and then ran out on his pals with about everything in the Company safe. Took a collar with him, too—some gimmick that's sacred to the Marshies, or something. He better never come back to Mars if he wants to stay healthy."

Rick said nothing. The 'copter field was still too far away.

THE driver rattled on. "Lots of guys is going to buy land here. Build cities, make the earth good again. Yeah, there's a great future on Mars. I'm gonna bring my wife and kids up from

Terra. There'll be a lot of work to do, and it'll mean something when we get through. Why, my boy might be President of the MPG some day!" He turned to Rick. "Why don't you grab yourself a piece of this? Ain't no future in space except old age and grav-bends . . ."

His voice trailed off. His eyes got wide. "Hey," he said. "Hey, you're—you're—Rick Urquhart!"

Rick hit him with his loaded fist. But the driver was tough, too, and quick. He was half stunned in spite of his rapid twist, but he fell across the horn and made it bleat like a scared goat—a goat enlarged to the size of a small spaceship. Drivers in other jeeps began to slow down and look around.

Rick kicked the guy clear out onto the ground and grabbed the wheel himself. Somebody yelled. More horns began to blare. Jeeps circled around, whipping up red veils of dust behind them. Rick jammed his foot down on the throttle.

The dregs of the *tsamo* in his system wiped out all emotion in him other than his determination to get where he was going. Only a complete lunatic could have got away with it. He did. He shot full speed toward the 'copter field, horn and throttle pressed wide open, and left it to the other men to get out of his way.

They did. Some of them so narrowly that a sheet of tissue paper would have been torn between the passing wheels, but they did. They weren't quite crazy enough to stand against the driver who didn't care whether they stood or not.

Rick crashed through onto the edge of the 'copter field. By this time there were alarms ringing and men running around, but nobody was quite sure yet what the trouble was. There was a sleek, fast little ship warming up out on the tarmac. Rick went for it. Three startled mechanics scattered away from his jeep. Rick jumped out and let it tear on by itself.

The owner of the 'copter came from the other side of the ship. The mechanics

closed in. There was a lot of noise. Rick hunched his shoulders, still cuddling the hunk of scrap in his fist. He knocked two of the mechanics cold. The third was too dizzy to get up, and the owner took one look at Rick and ran away.

Rick was clear of the ground before anyone else could get close enough to do anything.

He pushed the motor wide open, heading for a low range of hills in the distance. Other 'copters, six or seven of them, were shooting up from the field behind him in furious pursuit. Rick spared one hand for the telescreen. He listened briefly and then smiled, not because anything was funny.

His escape from the Mary Ellen Dow had been discovered, and the skipper was screaming to high heaven about it. The driver of the jeep had been revived sufficiently to tell who slugged him, and the field dispatcher was sending out a general alarm over the theft of the 'copter.

Such calls were addressed variously to the Martian Planetary Patrol and to Hugh St. John. Rick had never known anything on Mars to move that fast. The driver had been right—there was considerable feeling about that Urquhart guy, and none of it was friendly.

Rick left his screen on as an aid to keeping track of what Mars was doing about him. Angry, red-faced men tried repeatedly to make him answer direct calls. He left his transmitter off and didn't even bother to curse them privately.

The pursuing ships hung right on his tail, but he had played in luck. There wasn't anything there good enough to overhaul him. The hills swept up under him, worn and red and barren, scarred with hollow canyons like cavities in an old man's teeth. Rick's tawny brows got a deep cleft between them.

His pursuers couldn't catch him, but he couldn't get away. His position had been radioed all over Mars, and pretty soon there would be MPP ships circling in, and probably a few of St. John's

as well. All landing fields where he might go for fuel would be warned and closed against him. The 'copter didn't look like it was going to be much help to him.

He thought all that over, studying the landscape—screwed up tight inside but not panicky. Just coldly weighing his chances.

There began to be calls in quick Martian rattling through his receiver. MPP men signaling position, and getting close.

Far away down the tired line of hills, Rick saw a red cloud rolling in from the desert. He let his breath out in what might have been a laugh and kicked the rudder bar. The little ship made a tight arc across the sky, fled screaming, and plunged in a few moments later into the heart of the sandstorm.

XII

DEEP into the sandstorm plunged Rick's 'copter! It was one of those howling, angry khamsins that burst up from nowhere when the lonesome winds meet each other and start quarreling. They had swept up over the hills now, swirling their dusty cloaks in each other's faces. Anything less scientifically stabilized than the 'copter would have been smashed into the ground within ten minutes. But the little craft took the punishment bravely, bouncing wildly in the twisting currents, going where they pushed her, but riding them, her automatic stabilizers keeping her level. Rick set the controls and locked them. She'd fly on all right, all by herself.

There was a standard emergency escape kit in the rack. He strapped the harness around him, tied a thick cloth tightly over his face, and dropped through the hatch.

He fell into stifling sheets of sand. They wrapped themselves around him—crushed and beat and tore him, worked into his clothes and into his eyes and mouth and nose. He pressed the plunger on the escape rig. He was dropping fast, too fast. In the roar of the storm he

couldn't hear whether or not the lighter-than-hydrogen synthetic gas was going into the balloon or not. Seeing anything much was out of the question.

When his rate of descent slackened he was conscious of pressure by the harness. Relief brought a quick cold sweat out of him. He thought about back in the old days when a guy had to depend on a 'chute for a low altitude jump. He thanked Providence for whoever it was that thought up the synthesilk balloon which could be inflated in three seconds from a pressure tank and helped a man live through almost anything there was in the sky.

The 'copter would head empty out of the storm and with any luck the hounds would waste a lot of time chasing her. By that time Rick could have lost himself in the hills—providing the wind didn't slam him flat against a cliff.

It didn't, quite. The balloon bobbed out suddenly toward the edge of the storm. Noting the difference in the light, Rick uncovered his eyes, shielding them with his hands and peering through the merest slits. Dimly, very dimly, like the shadow of a submerged rock under his feet, he saw a ragged pinnacle, and then ahead of him a vast looming shape that looked solid.

He doubled his knees into his chest and took the impact as he would have taken a fall, on flexed legs. It jarred him badly, but no more. He pulled on the cord that let gas out of the bag, clinging desperately to the eroded rock. The wind dragged at the balloon, and the balloon dragged at his harness, and pretty soon his fingers were bleeding with hanging on, but he hung. In a minute or two the deflated bag flapped down around him.

It didn't weigh much, only a couple of pounds. Rick eased with infinite care out of the harness and let it drop. Then he just hugged the rock and waited.

THE storm went away as suddenly as it had come, leaving drifts of red dust in the sheltered places—partly

from the desert, partly dropped in the wind's fresh gnawing of the eroded cliffs. The sky was empty of ships. Down below him there was a ravine, with little tangled canyons leading out of it—leading to anywhere you wanted to go, to nowhere, to death.

Rick judged the position of the sun with great care, and began to climb down.

He reached the floor of the ravine without trouble, chose a canyon that extended in the direction he desired to go, and started to walk. He walked as silently as possible, stopping frequently to listen. In his former visits and his association with Martian spacerats, he had picked up a working knowledge of who—or what—lives where on the planet.

This was Shunni country, and had been vaguely something else before. "Before," on Mars, meant a long, long time. Somewhere ahead, beyond the foothills, was the Low-Canal town of Valkis, and the whole area had been intensely Pan-Martian. Rick didn't know how they'd feel about the Collar of Ruh, here on the other side of the planet. He could guess their sentiments about an Earthman, however. Any Earthman, but especially one named Richard Gunn Urquhart.

The canyon twisted aimlessly. It was hot. It was dry. Rick's tongue began to swell, with a taste like mouldy feathers. There had been no water on the 'copter—evidently the mechanics had not finished servicing her. His feet began to throb. It was quiet. Under the high walls on the canyon, with a narrow strip of sky overhead, it was like being dead and in the grave but not yet buried. As time wore on, Rick began to expect a shovelful of dirt in his face any minute. The dregs of the *tsamo* in him did queer things to his mind, gave rise to all kinds of imaginings.

He came finally to a sharp elbow bend. There was a cleft in the left-hand wall, like a window, and he looked out across foothill slopes at a town huddled, like

an old, old woman in ochre rags, beside a sluggish, dull canal.

That was Valkis. Valkis was a bad town. It was a thieves' market, a hide-out for wanted men, sinkhole of vice, a place where a lot of women and quite a few men went and were never heard of again. But it had something, or was supposed to have something. A landing field and a couple of camouflaged hangars and concealed ships such as no honest men ever possessed. Sleek things with souped-up motors that even the MPP ships couldn't touch.

Rick studied it with hard cat-eyes. He could afford to rest a while, now. Go down the slopes with the night and the shadows, later on, and hunt. And after that—well, there'd be time to plan.

He turned around, thinking about a safe place to hide and sleep, and discovered men had silently surrounded him. He hadn't heard so much as a breath, or the whisper of a sandal on rock, or the rubbing of leather harness. But they were there.

They were on both sides of him. Tall, hard-faced, solemn men with blank, hard, solemn eyes, with barbed spears in their hands and knives in their belts and the animal sheen of strength in their olive skins and olive-purple hair. Shunni barbarians.

Rick and they studied each other without speaking for some time. Finally one huge man pointed his chin at Valkis beyond the rock-window.

"You want to go to Valkis, Earthman-called-Rick?"

"You know me?"

"Every man on Mars know you. The seer have sent into very village the picture of the man who united Earth and Mars."

Rick nodded. "I want to go to Valkis."

The Shunni nodded back, slowly, with dignity.

"We are like brothers to the men of Valkis," he said. "You will go there."

Rick's eyes flickered. The men began to close in, still quiet, still solemn. Rick raised his hands slowly and leaned back

against the canyon wall.

"Look," he said. "I'm tired. I'm unarmed. I've had all the roughing up I want for a while. Just take it easy, and I'll be good."

They took it easy. Very easy, for barbarians with a deep and ancient hate in their souls. Too easy.

And they were as brothers to the men of Valkis.

AFTER a while, as they wound their way down the barren foothill gorges, Rick got the idea that there was some deep emotion behind the blank solemnity of their eyes. He got the idea that they were very happy men. They came to Valkis in the quick thin dusk. Because of the condition of Rick's feet, the Shunni had carried him most of the way, on a rude litter of spears and skin robes. It was as though they wanted him to rest and regain strength. But they kept him bound.

Rick guessed that some telepathic message had preceded them. The narrow streets, the roofs of the flat houses and the mouths of the dark alleys between them were crowded with people. Lithe rat-faced little men dressed in gaudy rags, and their lithe little women with bells in their black braids and their ears and around their ankles, making a wicked, whispering music up and down the shadowy streets.

There was no talk, no jeering, nor cursing. Rick walked erect between his Shunni guards, and the Martians watched him with their eyes of emerald and topaz—slanted eyes that showed no white around the iris—and nobody made a sound. The last of the light ran westward out of the sky, and then, in the darkness, a drum began to beat.

It came from somewhere ahead, in the center of the town. It boomed out six times with crisp authority, and was silent. As though it were a signal, the crowd began to flow into the street behind the Shunni, following, without speaking. The tinkling of the bells ran like canorous laughter in the stillness.

The drum sounded again, six more single blows. Then, abruptly, harps came thrumming in, the queer little double-banked things they play along the Low-Canals, that have such an unhealthy sympathy with human nerves that they act more like drugs than music. The drum began an intricate throbbing to an off-beat rhythm. As one man, Valkis sucked its breath in, and let it out in a long sigh. Richard Gunn Urquhart walked steadily, his face blank, his eyes hooded. His hands, tied behind his back were cold. Sweat trickled over his skin and presently, along the right side of his face, the muscles began to twitch spasmodically.

As they entered the town, he had seen the landing field, to the north along the canal.

They came to the water suddenly, running black and sluggish between banks of sunken stone. They turned north, and up ahead there were torches flaring orange against the night. The houses faced upon a square, the pavements of which had been worn hollow by countless generations of sandaled feet.

The drummer and the harpers were there. They were old women, wearing only a semblance of clothing, all their bodies that were uncovered, without paint or ornamentation, even their heads shaved clean. They were lost in a ritual (dance), their eyes glazed, their leathery shoulders twitching sharply as they breathed.

They crouched in a semi-circle around a gigantic slab of stone, raised no more than twelve inches above the ground level and polished black as though many hands had stroked it. Stone steps led down, under it.

Rick's gaze stabbed briefly around, looking for a way out and not finding it. Too many people, too much strength. He would have to wait until they untied his hands and removed the long hobble that let him walk, but not run. The Shunni had not, for one second, given him the slightest chance to escape.

They took him down the steps.

HE BEGAN to remember things he had heard about the gods of Valkis. Just talk, the idle scuttlebutt of the spaceways. Valkis kept its secrets well. But people talked, anyway, and what they said wasn't pretty.

They went down a long way in the dark and came out in a long square-roofed place that looked like a temple. The roof was supported with squat stone pillars. The first thing Rick noticed was the heat. Mars is a cold world, and down here it was as hot as Venus. Fires burned on round brick platters between the lines of pillars, tended by more of the shaven hags.

There was something more than fire. There was steam. He could hear the hiss of water over hot brick somewhere, from a hidden inlet from the canal. Stifling clouds of it drifted around, making the stones and the people glisten with sweat. The music was faint now, hardly more than an echo.

The mob flowed on around a huge pit sunk in the floor of the temple. It was about twelve feet deep. It was empty. It was clean. There were four doors in the walls, closed with curtains of crimson silk.

The Shunni halted Rick at the edge of the pit, and then for the first time somebody spoke.

A man, who might have been the mayor of Valkis, or the high priest, or both, came and stood in front of Rick. He looked the Earthman up and down, and the sheer distilled hate was almost like a visible aura.

"Look at him," the man whispered, staring at Rick. "Look at him!"

The stone walls took the whisper and played with it, so that every person in there could hear. They all looked.

"The Shadow over Mars! The shadow of outlaw rule, the shadow of death for our world and our people. Look at him! A thief and a liar—the man who put the yoke on our necks and nailed it there! But for him, there would have been no union."

A sound ran through the place like a

wolf licking its teeth.

Rick smiled, not because he felt like smiling.

"It's too bad for you, isn't it?" he said. "As soon as the new government is set, they'll clean you out of here like a nest of roaches. I don't wonder you're sore. The old way of no law at all was so much nicer."

The little man stepped back and kicked Rick with a diabolical accuracy below the belt.

"Untie the Earthman," he said. "Drop him into the pit. Drop him gently."

Once more, the Shunni were very, very kind. . . .

XIII

GIDDY and winded, Rick crouched on the stones, getting his wind back. Faces peered down at him, wreathed in the coiling steam. Once again there was silence. This time it was a hungry thing, crouched and waiting.

It was hot, with the heavy oppressive heat of a low jungle. The air was dead, unstirring, acrid with sweat. Now there began to be another odor under that. A rich dark smell of rotten earth—earth fattened with other things than dirt. A smell utterly alien to the dry thin air of Mars, where cactus and brittle scrub is all that grows.

Then he discovered the perfume.

It stole through and over the coarser smells, clear and poignant as the single note of a violin above the basses. It was faint, as though with distance, and yet it set all of Rick's nerves to quivering.

It was like the perfume the girls wear on the Street of Nine Thousand Joys, if you could take it off the body and put it on the soul. It promised all the sensual pleasures he knew, and a few he didn't know, and still there was nothing crude about it. It was the kind of perfume angels would wear while they were making love, spreading sweetness from the shaken silver feathers of their wings.

He was still all alone in the pit, and there was still no sound. The crimson

curtains hung motionless.

Rick's mouth tightened angrily. He glanced, without letting them see that he did, at the faces rimming the pit. They were expectant, waiting, the eyes unwinking, the mouths sucking shallow breaths over teeth bared and glistening to the firelight. They'd been here before, and they knew what was coming.

It was the waiting that got you. The silence, and the wondering. The muscles began to jerk again along his right cheek. He stood erect, and walked deliberately to the center of the pit. Then slowly so that they could see that his hands were steady, he put a cigarette in his mouth, lighted it, and drowned the match-flame in a long, easy plume of smoke.

That impressed them, a lot more than he'd dreamed. There was no tobacco on Mars, no climate nor soil to grow it. Smoking was still a new and startling thing.

A few of the Martians began to cough. The fumes were clinging heavily to the misty air, and their throats weren't used to it. Rick grinned and blew some more their way.

A sharp sigh sped around the pit suddenly, and the faces swayed inward. It had nothing to do with the cigarette. They were looking at something behind Rick.

He whirled and saw Mayo McCall standing there across from him, as though she had just stepped through the silken curtain.

She wore the torn, green coverall that bared her throat and shoulder, the dregs of the firelight poured red glints into her hair. There was sweat on her face, and drops of blood. She looked at him, and all her heart was in her eyes.

Rick's lips parted, but no sound came. He stood staring for a moment, and then he moved toward her—slowly at first, then more rapidly, until he was almost running. His bandaged hands reached out, and all at once there were tears on his cheeks.

"I love you, Rick," Mayo whispered,

and stepped back through the curtains, and was gone.

Rick cried her name and ripped the crimson silk away. There was a shallow niche beyond it. It was empty, and the solid stones mocked him with the sound of his own voice. He beat on them.

"Mayo!" he screamed, and the Martians let go a feral howl of laughter.

Rick turned around, half crouched and snarling. His eyes blazed crazily. That was what they'd been waiting for. That was part of the game.

"Mayo, Mayo!" his soul seemed to cry. "Where did you go, how did you get here, why did you run away?"

The sides of the pit were swimming before his eyes, as though he were drunk. The heat, cursed heat! The perfume!

"Steady down, Richard Gunn Urquhart!" he heard himself say. "Steady—or you'll make a damn fool of yourself!"

HE WAS swaying on his feet, but he didn't know it. He discovered he was still holding the cigarette. The bandages held his fingers close together so it hadn't dropped out. He took an other drag on it. The smoke did something—he didn't know whether it was better or worse. Anyway, it killed the lovely effluvium of that wretched perfume.

He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to find Kyra standing in the second doorway.

She stood on tiptoe, her wings outspread. They, and her huge dark eyes, held deep opaline lights. She was smiling, and in her hand was the Collar of Ruh.

A thin animal wail went up from the watching Martians—sheer hate made vocal. It touched an answering chord in Rick. The Collar grew large before his eyes, dwarfing Kyra, dwarfing the pit. It became as large as Mars. It was Mars.

"I know the prophecy—your shadow over Mars," Kyra said. "Life to Mars, instead of death. Your life—you live so strongly."

Rick hardly heard her. His blood beat thunderously inside his skull. Kyra, Mayo, everything was drowned in a hot flood of desire. Mars. Power, wealth, Richard Gunn Urquhart the space-rat made into the guy at the top of the heap.

He laughed up at the Martians, savage laughter, and taunted them with the filth of three worlds and a dozen dialects. The dull iron bosses of the Collar blinked redly, like somnolent eyes. Dying Mars, awaiting the conqueror.

He reached out to take the Collar.

It slipped through his fingers. Kyra smiled and vanished through the curtains.

Again Rick cried out and wrenched the hangings down. Again there was nothing but a shallow niche and emptiness, and hard stone under his hands.

And once again the Martians laughed.

Rick staggered back to the center of the pit. He did not cry out now, nor curse. He looked with narrow, empty eyes at the faces peering down, the dark fresco of them above him in the steam, studded with hot jewels and the white glitter of teeth. He was afraid.

The perfume stroked his olfactory nerves with fingers of soft flame. It was pleasant. It sent ripples of sensuous delight through him. Yet because it was part of what was being done to him he feared it, and especially so because it was pleasant. The animal was close to the surface in Rick, and it spoke.

"Bait for the trap," it said.

He raised the hand that held the cigarette, and it was not until then that he realized he was on all fours. That frightened him most of all. He dragged hungrily on the butt, burning slowly in the wet air. It made him dizzy and sick, but he would stand up again.

He did, and there was a naked girl poised in front of the third door—a green-eyed wanton with coppery hair curling on her white shoulders and her lips brimming with secret laughter. She twitched the curtains aside and beyond them Rick saw the Street of Nine Thou-

sand Joys, bright with lanterns and the warm light spilling out of familiar doorways, human and safe with voices, quarrels, music, the smell of wine.

The Street of Nine Thousand Joys, where Richard Gunn Urquhart was just Rick the space-rat, without a prophecy, with no enemies, and no destiny but tomorrow's hangover. Escape. . . .

"Go back and be just Rick again," something was telling him. "Forget Mars and the Collar and the woman named Mayo. Get good and drunk and forget, and stop tearing your heart out. Above all, escape!"

The girl tossed her head and moved away, watching him over her shoulder. Rick followed. He called to her to wait, lurching unsteadily, fighting down a childish urge to cry. She shook her curly head mockingly and fled before him down the dappled shadows, and Rick ran after.

He heard the wicked stream of laughter from above him just an instant before he crashed headlong into a blank wall of stone. He dropped, stunned. The girl, the Street, vanished, and there was only an empty niche like the others.

Rick lay still. Presently he began to sob, his mouth relaxed and wet as a child's.

THE perfume soothed Rick. It was like a woman's fingers, comforting. His mother's fingers. Into his mind came a picture of the fourth door. Beyond that he would find rest. That was where the perfume came from. He could go beyond that curtain into the darkness, alone and in peace. He could sleep. He could forget.

Quite slowly, he got to his hands and knees and began to crawl toward the fourth door. There was no sound anywhere now. The Martians seemed to have stopped breathing.

Something kept trying to jar Rick's mind awake again. A smell, an acrid, familiar reek that clashed with the perfume. He didn't want to wake. He ignored it and went on crawling.

He came to the fourth door and thrust the crimson hangings back. Before him was a dark passageway, slanting sharply down. The perfume breathed from it, and under it, suddenly strong, the rich smell of earth. A latent memory made Rick reach out and feel the emptiness, not quite knowing why he did. The passageway was really there.

He crawled into it. The last thing he heard as the crimson draperies closed behind him was the laughter of the Martians like the spring cry of wolves on a hilltop.

It was easy to crawl, half sliding, down the slope. Presently he could sleep, and forget. . . .

Pain, a savage searing stab of it between his fingers. It shook through the drugged clouds in his brain. He tried to push it away, but it slashed and stabbed and wouldn't go, and the involuntary reflexes of his body fought to do something about it. He raised his hand, and again the acrid smell assailed him. There was a little red glow in the darkness.

The cigarette stuck between his fingers had burned down and was searing the tender flesh. The bandage was smoldering.

He pushed the butt out and hugged his hand to him. The pain helped to clear his head. Memories came back to him—the cryptic torture in the pit, the Martians watching him. Rage boiled up to help the pain. He was aware suddenly that the perfume was stronger, and a clear terror of it came to him. It was a drug, and it was going to get him under again.

Slowly he was sliding down the shaft.

He pressed his boots hard against the opposite wall and peered down. Far below was a phosphorescent glimmer, a glimpse of space. And—flowers!

White flowers, pale and lovely, swaying as though a vagrant breeze blew over them. Infinitely beautiful, breathing perfume, calling to him.

"Come!" they whispered. "Come and sleep!"

"What are you?" he asked. "Where do you come from?"

"There were many of us when the world was young," droned the answer. "We grew in the green jungles. We ruled Mars before man could walk erect."

The men of Valkis had found them, then, some time in the ancient past, a handful of them clinging on beside some sheltered volcanic spring. And they built a temple, and the flowers lived on.

They were beautiful. They were friendly. They smelled nice.

Rick slipped farther toward them. His head was swimming.

"How did I see Mayo?" he asked the flowers. "What were those things out there?"

"We take the images uppermost in a man's mind and let him see them, the things he wants most."

The thought broke off short. "Why?" Rick asked drowsily.

"Come," said the flowers. "Come, and sleep."

SLEEP . . . the smell of the fat black earth came strong under the perfume, and the animal instinct of his body told Rick what it was fattened with.

He braced his feet frantically to stop his sliding. He was afraid. He knew, now. But it was too late. The drug had him, and he couldn't fight.

He began to slip again.

His burned hand hurt him, rubbing the rock. Cigarette burn. Tobacco. Out there in the pit, it had helped, a little. Even a little—perhaps, being a drug, it fought the other drug. It wouldn't hurt to try.

He fumbled the pack out. His hands were clumsy from the bandages, and they shook. He dropped the pack. It slid away down the shaft and dropped among the flowers.

"Come," they said. "Come and sleep."

He hunted through his pockets. Feverishly, panting. He found one crumpled cigarette, dropped out of the

pack and forgotten.

He was careful not to drop it, nor the matches.

He filled himself with the smoke, over and over. It nauseated him, but it fought the perfume a little, enough so he could think. Not clearly, but enough. Enough for him to claw his way back up the shaft, inch by inch pressing his boots against the stone and inching his way back up, digging his nails into the irregularities of the rock, climbing with his muscles the way a snake glides on his scales, because he had to or die.

The flowers were angry. They were hungry. They hurled the perfume at him in drowsy clouds, but the harsh smoke fought it back. He reached the level space behind the curtains and lay there, shaking and exhausted. The cigarette was used up. He took to slapping his own face violently, pressing the raw burn, anything to keep his mind awake.

There was no sound outside in the temple but the faint crackling of the fires. Rick peered through the curtains. The gloating faces were gone from the pit rim. They hadn't waited. There was nothing to wait for. Nobody had ever before come back up that shaft. Rick went out and studied the walls.

The old women who tended the fires would not be watching the pit, either. They would be huddled over their bony knees in the heat, dreaming of the days when they wore little bells in their hair and had chimed the hot-eyed men into dusky chambers beside the Low-Canal.

The walls were old, old beyond counting. The blocks had settled and moved a little, so that their surface was not even. The walls could be climbed. Evidently, because the Martians were not affected, atmospheric pressure kept the perfume lower than the pit edge. He'd be safe when he got up there.

He climbed, biting his lips to keep his drowsy brain awake.

After an eternity he reached the top and lay panting on the stones, covered with cold sweat. He began to shudder

violently. Gradually his head cleared.

It was very still in the temple, full of steam, full of shadows and wickedness. The old women crouched by their fires, dreaming, the wrinkled skin twitching across their shoulders, now and then, as though a hand stroked it. Rick began to move, through the quivering darkness behind the farthest line of pillars against the wall.

He reached the stairs and crept up them. The drummer and the harpers were gone from the square. The cruel, noisy life of Valkis was going on in the surrounding streets, but apparently this place was sacred to religion. It was deserted now.

Rick slipped quietly into the black water of the canal and began to swim northward. Lights blazed across the water here and there. Men and women thronged the bank in front of the canal-side houses. But Rick was a good swimmer, and no one saw him. He hauled out on the edge of the landing field.

There was nobody around, no reason for anybody to be around. Rick found a scrap of iron and pried the lock off the nearest hangar. There was a 'copter inside, a sleek wicked little thing with an illegal motor.

There was only one place on Mars Rick wanted to go. He went there, like a comet rushing to perihelion.

He went to Caer Hebra.

XIV

CAER HEBRA came into Rick's view, just before sundown, its marble spires almost drowned and lost in the drifting sand. He set the 'copter down on a massive terrace, stained and cracked, but still retaining its perfect symmetry, and climbed out.

Before his boots touched the ground he was surrounded by the little winged men of the island kingdom. No women greeted Rick this time. The small ivory faces of the men were stern, and their small furred hands held pencil-tubes.

Rick was not conscious of fear. He

was not conscious of anything but the need in him."

"Is Kyra here?"

The leader nodded slowly. No one spoke. Many wings made a sad silken rustling in the lonely wind. Sand etched light feathery patterns on the marble beneath their feet.

"I will see her," Rick said.

The leader nodded again.

"It is her wish, and the wish of the dying must be heeded," he said. "For that reason, Earthman, you will live to go away from Caer Hebra. Come."

The word "dying" shocked Rick. It cut through the numbness of his inner mind. He started and cried out, "Kyra!" There was no answer. The little men motioned him on. He obeyed.

She lay on a heap of soft furs, high up in a tower where she could look out across the dry sea. She held out her hands to Rick and smiled.

"I knew you would come," she said.

Rick took her hands, gently, as though they were flowers and easily crushed. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"The black Earthman burned her," said the leader, behind him.

"She will not live."

Kyra's fingers tightened on him. "I followed them, Rick. You sent me to watch Mayo, and I did. I couldn't stop him from taking her, but I followed their ship. It went very fast, and I lost it, but I kept flying north and after a long time I sighted it again. I went down to it, and Jaffa Storm came out from the ice dome and saw me. But I broke the controls, Rick. With a stone I broke them, so his ship couldn't fly. And it was dark, very dark for an Earthman's eyes, so I got away."

She was drawing him down to her as though he were too far away for her to see him clearly.

"I tried to get back to Ruh, to the Company, to find you, Rick. But I couldn't fly that far. I couldn't. I knew you'd come here, only I was so afraid it might be too late.

Rick knelt down beside her. He looked over his shoulder at the men.

"Get out," he said.

They were angry. For a while they didn't move. Rick's yellow eyes took on a peculiar, phosphorescent glow. Kyra had forgotten that her people existed. Presently they turned and left.

"North," said Kyra. "North, in the Polar Cities under the ice dome."

"I wouldn't have had you do it," Rick whispered.

The rosy light fell across her face from the sunset, warming the ivory pallor. Her great eyes held a soft brilliance.

"Don't be sad for me, Rick."

He said nothing.

"I'm not sad. I haven't lived many years, but there isn't anything more I could have had from life. I've loved you, Rick, and in a way we've been mated, haven't we? I helped you to create a new world, even if it was only a little bit of help. Not many women have given life to a planet, have they, Rick?"

"No."

"I'll live in that new world. We believe in rebirth. Some day my soul will have a new body and it will remember. It will say to me, 'I did this. With Rick, I did this.' And I will be happy."

She fumbled suddenly at the zipper of his shirt, drawing it down. She thrust her hand inside, against his chest.

"So strongly—I can feel it beating. That's Mars, Rick. So much life and strength, and we were so tired."

He bent over and kissed her. Then he stretched out beside her, holding her like a child in the curve of his arm, her head against his shoulder. She went to sleep smiling.

The sun went down in the dry waves and Phobos came up from the western horizon as though borne on the afterglow. By the time Deimos had marched from the east to his nightly mating, Rick knew that Kyra would not be disturbed if he arose and went away.

He set her back in her nest of furs. From some forgotten corner of his

childhood the sign of the cross came unbidden. He made it and went out.

SILENTLY the little men of Caer Hebra stood in the wind and the moon-shadows and watched him take off. It was not until he had flown north for some hours that he realized why his eyes and throat were sore and the skin of his face stiff as though with dried sea-water. . . .

He had been flying for a long, long time. He was cold and cramped, and the fuel gauge needle kept fluttering over to pat the permeal E.

The terrain below was a desert forgotten by God and man. Now, in the Martian spring, the gorges ran full with thaw-water that fed the canals. There were mosses and lichens and a few tough flowers.

But the black rock was rotted and split by time, ice, wind and water, and it looked as untouched by humanity as the Moon.

Far ahead he could see the soaring edges of the ice cap—the core that remained through every summer. He checked his course against the location of the Polar Cities, which were mapped but seldom visited. When a curious visitor did drop in, he returned with a weird tale of voices that spoke in his brain and told him, gently but with unmistakable firmness, to go away again. Nobody, except in ancient legend, had ever found the entrances to the ice domes under which the Cities were hidden.

Since those domes were regular in shape and never melted, even slightly, in high summer, it was assumed by some that the mysterious Thinkers kept them that way artificially. The Terran invasion of Mars was too young and too much interested in money to bother with half-legendary cities that no one had ever seen. A Martian, of course, observed the taboos with strict etiquette, and most of the few Earthmen who had heard of the Polar Cities put them down as legend growing around a

natural freak.

Rick's motor began to miss. He nursed and coaxed it onward, toward the glittering rim of ice knifing the pale sky. Presently it died altogether and no amount of cursing or praying could start it again. Rick pulled the glasses from the locker beside him and scanned the ground.

He saw the domes, three of them clustered together in a circle. They were far off, glistening like drops of water on a stone.

He still had altitude. He played the light 'copter like a glider on the wind, fighting for every inch of headway. He made it, almost. Just before he was forced to make a landing he sighted Jaffa Storm's ship on the ground, a tiny speck beside one of the domes.

He landed safely on a broad strip of rock ground flattened by moving ice, well out of sight of the domes. He was not sure that that made much difference, for he was by now thoroughly convinced of Jaffa Storm's telepathic powers. But instinct and training made him go cautiously, just the same.

An area of tumbled boulders offered cover. Rick slipped and stumbled between them until, after a long time, he would look out onto the level space before the domes where Storm's 'copter was.

He had no weapon except the scrap of metal, which he had dropped into his pocket. There had been no blaster in the ship, and no way to get one.

Neither could he discover any cover. Rick walked out across the open ground. The lean Martian sunlight touched the domes. They were huge and perfectly round, and the light shone through them, pellucid and pure, like light through raindrops. High above them, shearing off half the sky, was the pale ice-green blade of the polar cap.

Nothing stirred. There was no sound. The 'copter had a desolate and forgotten look until he got close enough to see that someone had been working on it, repairing the controls. He studied them.

The job had been competently done. The ship would fly.

Yet the ship was still there.

Still beside the little ship, Rick looked around him. His ears, his eyes, the nerves of his skin were tuned so acutely that they ached.

Silence. Empty earth and the enigmatic domes which were like huge animals asleep and which could not tell their dreams to anybody. Over all the crushing impersonality of the ice and above that, the cold pale sky.

Rick shivered. His cheek muscles twitched and the lids narrowed cat-like over his yellow eyes. He went toward the nearest dome.

There were footprints in the bare ground. Many lines of them, going both ways. The mark of the left boot was light. There were no signs of Mayo's prints.

RICK followed them, walking steadily but without haste. The stories of the mental compulsion to go away returned to him. He felt no compulsion whatsoever. Either the legends lied or something had changed inside the domes.

He followed the footprints up to the curving clear wall, and nothing happened. Nothing at all.

He found the entrance. It was a hallway half-closed with intermeshing sheets of crystal that slid back into the ice and could not be told from it. A man could be caught between those crystal panels. He could be crushed and cut apart, or trapped unhurt to die slowly in a little shining cell.

He stood for a moment or two, listening to the stillness. Then he went in.

His footsteps rang back at him like echoes in a bell. Several times, through tricks of light and perspective, he thought the doors were sliding in. But he reached the interior safely. In spite of himself he was shaking and covered with sweat.

He was looking at a city.

It was sunk below ground level, so

that he was even with the tops of the spires. It was not very big, limited to about ten thousand inhabitants. But it was the most beautiful thing Rick had ever seen, and the most unpleasant.

He'd been in the Lunar cave-cities. He'd walked through the fantastic monuments of an unknown race on Phobos, and on Venus he had seen a drowned empire under the silver sea. But this beat them all. It turned his stomach over.

The buildings were all made of the same material—a colorless plastic that took the prismatic sunlight from the dome overhead and played with it, so that the walls seemed to be full of drifting jewels. That was all right. It was the shape of things that got you.

Wherever the Thinkers came from, whatever they were, they had either brought with them or discovered an alien geometry. The buildings swept the eye along curves and angles that veered sickeningly toward another universe. The shapes of them, the meaning of them, gave the mind a shock. It was like the dream of a crazy surrealist painter brought to life, unhealthy and at the same time fascinating.

There was a swift musical clashing behind Rick. He turned around, and found that the way had closed behind him. There were no controls of any kind, so far as Rick could see.

He went down transparent steps to the city.

It was dead. He could feel that. The silence had been there too long, and the streets had stopped waiting. The leaning walls looked at him malevolently, not liking the echoes his feet called forth. Rick's eyes began to smolder.

He stopped abruptly, filled his lungs. "Mayo!" he yelled.

The cry broke into a million fragments and tinkled back at him with a sound of subtle laughter. He went on, holding a course for the far side of the city. From up there by the entrance he had seen another flight of shining steps and a hall, leading into the adjoining dome.

He wondered if Jaffa Storm had let him get inside and then gone out by another way with Mayo.

It was about then he heard the music.

IT CAME softly, and in some strange way it was linked with color, so that Rick saw and heard it at the same time. The harmony was like the buildings. It was not born in a normal mind—normal, at least, by human standards. It came from everywhere, like the air. Rick supposed the system resembled a public address system of some kind, serving the whole city.

He could feel his brain crawling around in his skull, trying to hide.

The colors came stronger, pulsing like veils of mist through the eerie streets. They kept sliding off the edges of the spectrum into something else. They did things to the emotions, the nerves, even the intestinal functions. The music plucked at Rick's mind, stimulating it with notes and rhythms it was never meant to hear.

He began to think, suddenly, that he could understand the symbolic meanings of the buildings and where the curves led.

After that, for a while, he lost track of things, or very nearly. Some stubborn piece of his consciousness ran over the nightmare hills behind him, crying out, and nothing could stop it. Abruptly its cry got through to him and dragged him back, balanced delicately on a hair-line between two worlds.

He was stark naked, and he was embracing a crystal pillar of no shape that he knew under the sun.

He sprang away from the pillar in shuddering nausea, clawing and clinging to his sanity.

"Wait," he thought. "Storm's doing this. He pushed a button somewhere to start this concert, like the guys that lived here used to do. He's looking in your mind and laughing to beat the devil, watching you fall apart. You going to let him laugh?"

Rick straightened up. That would

mean Storm was still here, to be caught and killed. Things might yet work out.

Cords knotted up under the sweat on Rick's face. He pulled his strength, every bit of it, together, and sheathed his mind against the music and the colors. He started walking toward the nearest wall of the dome. He watched his feet and counted the steps, carefully, one by one.

If he was wrong, and Storm had gone away, it would mean disaster! But wait! He had quit thinking things like that.

He reached the wall. He was not steady on his feet, but he was still counting. Far away along the curve he saw the steps again and went over and climbed them. Suddenly he realized that the hellish concert was over.

He sat down on the top step and waited until he had stopped shaking. Then he went into the next dome.

XV

NO BUILDINGS were here in this dome, no houses. In the center was a gigantic structure of metal and plastic. It hummed faintly, and a pale, shimmering radiance came out of it.

Ranged around it were row upon row of soft couches covered, coffin-like, with the transparent plastic. People lay upon them, either dead or asleep.

Rick could find no sign here of Storm and Mayo. He looked for the entrance to the dome beyond, found it, and started out across the floor.

The creatures under the plastic shields were not human. They were anthropoid but, somehow, in the texture of their flesh and the shape of their features, there was something alien.

They lay quietly. If they breathed or stirred, Rick couldn't see it. But they were not dead, for their flesh was warm-looking and not decayed.

He supposed that these were the Thinkers, who had built the city he had just left behind him. They seemed to be sexless. Their nude bodies were all

alike. They had a perfection and beauty of form as unpleasant as their buildings.

Rick walked steadily toward the archway leading into the last of the three domes. He was not frightened or even excited. A man such as he came to the end of things, and one way or another, that was that. He looked around for a weapon, anything that could be used as one. There was nothing. He flexed his bandaged hands and went on.

There was no shelter, no cover of any kind around the steps and the archway. Rick did not try to hide. It was no use hiding from a telepath like Storm. What Rick wanted now was the finish, as quickly as possible. He wanted Storm.

There was no thought of death in his mind—for himself.

He climbed the stairway. He caught a glimpse of what looked like a vast laboratory and machine shop, and then Jaffa Storm was standing above him on the top step, his heavy blaster leveled at Rick's muscular body.

Rick stopped. Storm smiled at him, quite pleasantly.

"Where's Mayo?" asked Rick.

Storm jerked his head slightly, backward. "In there. She's quite safe. She won't be able to help you, though. I had to tie her up right at the beginning and keep her that way. She's a wildcat."

His black eyes looked Rick up and down. "Too bad you're going to miss the fun of seeing me break her will."

Rick said nothing. His hands hung limp beside his naked thighs. His face was expressionless, his eyes veiled. He was halfway up the crystal steps, something less than his own height below Storm's feet.

"How did you like the concert?" Storm said.

Rick didn't answer.

Storm laughed. "Don't bother. I know. I was watching your mind every second." He indicated the sleepers beneath their coffin lids. "Curious tastes those birds had. I still don't know what they are or where they came from. I can't get through to their minds. I

think that mentally they're not here any more, but have gone on into some realm of pure thought. The bodies, I think, are synthetic."

He broke off and stood studying Rick, and thought he wanted to impress every feature, every line on his memory.

"I never want to forget you," he said. "I have never before met a man I hated as much as I do you. I think I hate you because you're nearly as strong as I am, and that makes me afraid. I'm not used to being afraid. I don't like it."

"You've lost Mars," said Rick. "I took that from you."

"No," Storm said slowly. "No, you haven't. You messed up my plans, all right. You came blamed near killing me, too. Very smart of you to realize at the last minute that I had probably read your mind and would be ready for you. I was mighty busy, as you can imagine, and I didn't get the switch until it was too late to do anything but jump out of the way. As it was, I received a nasty cut from some flying metal, and my disintegrator was smashed to glory."

He swore abruptly, though softly. "I wish I could think of a way to kill you that would really satisfy me."

Rick's mouth twisted in what was almost a lazy half-smile. You can't kill me, Storm. This is my road, not yours."

Storm stared at him a moment. Then he laughed. "By Jupiter, you believe that, don't you?"

Rick nodded. "You knew I was coming."

"Yes. I kept track of the little one—what was her name, Kyra?—of her mind, until I knew she couldn't do me any harm, and I kept pretty close check on yours, too" He chuckled. St. John and the Martian pulled a fast one on you, for fair! I always told that thick-headed Fallon he underestimated them."

RICK'S eyes, after the mention of Kyra, had become deadly in a peculiarly cold way, as though no ordinary human emotion could express what he felt. He still had not moved.

"But you've lost Mars," he repeated. "No. That's the difference between us, Rick—the difference that's going to cost you everything. I trained my mind. It works for me, not I for it. When I found out what you were planning to do, uniting the Martians and the Earthmen against me, I knew you had a fair chance of succeeding. So I used my head."

"I'd been curious about the Thinkers for some time. The Martian seers, who might have discovered the truth, were forbidden to pry by their hereditary taboos. No Earthman had the power. But I did, and to blazes with taboos. I found out that the Thinkers thought-barrier—the mental compulsion felt by anyone trying to enter the domes—was merely broadcast by a mechanism similar to a televisior. It was automatic, and Lord knows how long it's been running. I cut it off, of course, for your benefit."

"Anyway, after I forced my mind past that barrier, I found that the Thinkers have simply—gone away. They're still alive, because I can feel the vibrations from their brains, but they've withdrawn somewhere beyond this world. I suppose they reached the point in their peculiar evolution where pure thought was the only unconquered realm left."

"But they left things behind them, Rick. An armory of weapons and machines such as men have dreamed of but have never been able to produce. Disintegrators. Mental amplifiers. Energy projectors that make our Bannings look like children's toys. The Thinkers were named for a reason, you know. By gosh, I wish I knew what they were, where they came from! I'll hazard a guess, though. I think they were pre-human, and that their introverted culture was driven out by the appearance of man on the planet. So they built the domes, and that incredible city, and surrounded themselves with taboos, and lived peacefully in their own way."

"They went through a period of scientific invention that must have lasted an incredible number of years. Inven-

tion just for the kick of it, too. They never passed any of it on to humanity, and only used themselves what they needed for their own comfort. Like that gizmo there."

Storm indicated the huge humming mechanism in the center of the dome.

"That warms them, feeds them by direct energy, keeps their bodies alive while their minds are playing around free in space and time," he said. "Queer buried sparks came in his black eyes. 'I wish I could follow them,' he whispered, 'for a little while.'"

Rick leaped forward without warning.

He threw himself flat, clutching at Storm's ankles. It was the time he had waited for—the single second when Storm's mental attention was on something other than the brain of Richard Gunn Urquhart.

Storm's blaster beam flared obliquely, almost roasting the skin on Rick's back, but not quite hitting him. Rick grasped the cloth of Storm's coverall and yanked with all his might. Storm fell back on his shoulder-blades, and the blaster let off a second time, at the top of the dome.

Rick's bare feet found traction on the steps and flung him forward again, his whole weight across Storm's body. The big man lost some more breath, and Rick clawed for the blaster.

THE fall must have hurt Storm, but he didn't let it stop him. He used his free hand, and his knees, and his heavy boots. He was strong. Rick was a big man, and powerful, but Storm was stronger. He beat the living daylights out of Rick, but he couldn't shake him loose from that blaster.

Rick curled his naked body up, tightened his muscles, and took it. There was only one thing in the universe that mattered—the blaster. He got hold of Storm's thumb and worked, doggedly.

It broke. It tore clear out of the socket in a mess of ripped flesh and tendons, and Storm screamed like a wounded animal, and that was that. Rick had the blaster.

He broke away, to get far enough off to use it. One of Storm's boots took him squarely in the abdomen. Rick rolled back down the steps and lay there, trying to retch his insides out. The blaster skidded away across the crystal floor.

Storm got up. He looked at his hand. He pulled out his handkerchief and bound it tightly, using his teeth. Then he leaned against the wall of the arch and vomited.

At the foot of the steps, Rick was trying to get to his hands and knees, and sobbing aloud.

Storm noted where the blaster was. It had skittered far away, much farther away than Rick could hope to move for some time. Storm went down on the other side, into the laboratory dome.

Mayo McCall lay in the shelter of a machine too big and heavy for her to tip over. She was tied securely, and gagged. She needed no voice to tell Storm her thoughts. Her eyes told enough.

"You can kiss him good bye—what's left of him after I'm through," he whispered.

He found the small mechanism he was looking for, placed conveniently with others he had intended to take out to the 'copter after he was done with Rick. It was a harmless-looking little gadget—a shield over a prism inside a triangle of slightly luminous metal.

Storm wasn't sure how it worked. He guessed at cosmic ray frequencies, snared by the triangle and concentrated through the prism. But he knew what it would do.

He placed his left hand carefully behind the shield, his remaining thumb over the control stud, and went back up the steps.

Rick had crawled to within ten feet of the blaster. Storm smiled. He pressed the stud. A little gossamer thread of radiance spun out from the prism. It touched the blaster. The metal crumbled to dust and then vanished.

"Rick—Ricky!" Storm said gently.

Rick turned his head. The great cen-

tral machine hummed quietly, and the Thinkers dreamed their cosmic dreams, and paid no attention to the man who crouched naked on their floor, or the black giant who stood on their steps with destruction in his hands.

"You can't kill me," Rick whispered.

Storm laughed, without sound, and pressed the stud again.

Rick moved. Where he found the strength in himself he never knew, except that it was that or die, and he wasn't ready to die. He rolled sideways. The beam missed him, eating a snaky groove in the floor. The outermost row of coffins was close to him. He pulled himself behind the nearest one. They were solid to the floor. They offered cover, and though Storm could follow him mentally, he couldn't see to aim.

Rick started working back across the dome.

Storm followed him. He laced the coffins with the crumbling light, leaving them ruined, the bodies within them partially destroyed. The Thinkers never stirred. Their minds were too far away, to be caring what happened to their flesh.

RICK played Storm with a sort of insane mixture of cleverness and sheer courage. He stayed behind each particular coffin until the beam had eaten dangerously close. Then he rolled or slid obliquely across the crystal floor, each time in a different direction, so that he was always screened except for an occasional second. Storm might have hit him, right handed. Left-handed, he couldn't.

Not at first, anyway. But Rick knew his luck couldn't hold forever. He felt like a plucked hen, with nothing in his hands, not even a rock.

His eyes blazed and narrowed suddenly. He began to circle, so that presently he would come back to the path they had already followed, where the ruined coffins were. Storm came doggedly after him. Storm was in no hurry. He was enjoying himself.

Rick came up to the coffin he wanted. It had been eaten away so that the plastic top was partly gone. The body inside was in two pieces now, cut cleanly through the middle. There was no blood, no viscera, no abdominal cavity. The flesh looked like sponge rubber.

Rick, crouched behind the coffin, reached up and took hold of the legs.

He waited for a long moment, his brows knotted in concentration.

Storm stood erect, smiling faintly, playing his disintegrator beam on Rick's shelter. Because of the arrangement of the coffins Storm's whole body was exposed to Rick's view if he looked over the top or around the right-hand end. From the left-hand, Storm's legs were hidden by the corner of another couch.

Rick whipped his unpleasant weapon down. It was lighter than human legs would have been, but heavy enough.

But Storm laughed, avoided it easily without taking his eyes from Rick's coffin. Suddenly he flicked the disintegrator beam upward, aiming above the right-hand corner.

At the same instant, Rick's head and shoulder thrust up over the left-hand corner. He hurled the trunk section of the Thinker's synthetic body at Storm's head—and he did it left-handed.

Storm was slow, a fractional instant, caught off balance. The clumsy thing struck him. It was not heavy enough to stun him, or even do more than stagger him back against one of the coffins. But it was heavy enough to hamper him, and the dead arms went around him almost as though the reflexes still lived in their inhuman flesh.

Rick moved. He had never moved so fast in his life. Bruises, aches, weariness, the pain he carried with him, nothing mattered. He moved. He hit Storm before the carrion had slid free of his arm, or been shaken off.

Storm fired at Rick, but the beam went past him, and then Rick's hand chopped down edgewise across Storm's wrist and the deadly prism dropped.

Rick got his bandaged hands where he had told Hugh St. John he wanted them.

He held them there, his eyes half closed and happy, cat-like, long after there was any need. Storm didn't die easy, but he died.

"Instinct," whispered Rick conversationally to the blackened face below his. "I'm left-handed. You didn't know that. You watched my mind figure out what I was going to do, and because you're right-handed you figured how it would be—only I'm left-handed. So you shot in the wrong place. Instinct, see? There was no conscious thought in my mind to tip you, and your own instinct crossed you up."

Storm didn't answer. He couldn't answer—now!

XVI

YES . . . Storm was dead. But Rick didn't mention that to Mayo when he staggered into the laboratory dome and untied her. There aren't any words at a time like that. They clung to each other for a while, and Mayo cried a little, and Rick did, too.

After a time, when the world had stopped swinging quite so wildly around them, Rick got up and began walking around, looking at the machines. He was a good mechanic. He was able to figure out what more of them were for, within reason. He was wearing Storm's black coverall. Storm's cigarettes were still in the breast pocket. Rick lighted one. His face was expressionless.

"What are you thinking, Rick?" Mayo said.

He didn't answer. Mayo got up and went slowly to the collection of mechanisms Storm had gathered together.

"He told me all about what happened," she said. "Hugh and Eran Mak will govern Mars well. Things will be good, if they're left alone to do what they've dreamed of."

Still Rick didn't answer.

Mayo picked up a small tube and

aimed it at him.

"You can't have Mars," she said. "I won't let you have it, to play with."

He stood looking at her for a moment, with nothing in his eyes but a blank coldness.

"Yesterday I was in Caer Hebra," he said, as though to himself. "Kyra talked to me. I heard her."

Mayo was puzzled. She let the tube waver a little, and suddenly Rick was laughing at her.

"A tough baby, you are! And by Jeffrey, I'm not so sure you wouldn't use it, at that!" He turned away, blowing smoke at the lucid dome. "How do we get out of here?"

"I watched Storm. I know where the controls are. I can turn on the thought-projector, too, if we want to. But, Rick—what are you planning?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"No."

He went back to her.

"Now do you trust me?" he asked again, after a while.

"Less than ever. Oh Rick, won't you please—"

He stopped her words with his lips. "I haven't said anything, have I? Now let's clear out of this place."

Mayo's eyes held a cold doubt, but she nodded. Later, when she thought he wasn't looking, she slipped the tube into the pocket of her coverall.

"What about all this stuff?" she asked. "It's dangerous, Rick."

"It's been safe this long. I guess it'll keep a little longer. We'll pass the problem on to Mak and St. John and let them sweat about it."

"You're going to see them?"

"Yeah."

Rick reached into the pocket of his coverall and pulled out the little energy projector Storm had used—the prism in the shining triangle. He turned the thing over in his hands, scowling at it, and then dropped it on the pile beside Mayo.

"Where's the control, honey?"

"For this dome, it's over there on .

the left. Or do you want to go back through the city?"

"No," he said. "I do not want to go back through the city."

Mayo went away. When she came back he put his arm around her shoulders as they crossed the dome to the hidden entrance.

They took the fuel from Storm's 'copter and carried it to Rick's and took off. Presently Rick noticed that Mayo was crying quietly.

"What's wrong?"

"I was thinking of Kyra. Storm told me about it. He would. I'm glad you could be with her."

"Yeah," said Rick. "Yeah, she died happy."

THEY sighted pursuing ships several times, but nothing could stay with them. Rick lapsed into a sullen, brooding silence and snarled at Mayo every time she tried to speak. Finally she gave it up. She sat with her eyes closed, and a couple of grim, tight lines hardened into the corners of her mouth.

Presently Rick turned on his transmitter and got in touch with the Company. The switchboard operator goggled at him and then began pushing plugs frantically. In a couple of seconds Hugh St. John was looking out of the screen at Rick, with Eran Mak behind his shoulder.

They both saw Mayo at the same time, and came crowding against the screen as though they wanted to get through to her. Especially St. John. Rick watched him sourly. "That guy's crazy about her," he thought. "He's so crazy about her his blood's almost tepid. The lily!"

They hardly noticed Rick at first, until Mayo had told about Storm and the Polar Cities, and what Rick did there. Then St. John turned to him.

"I'm glad you came back," he said gravely.

"That's fine," Rick answered. "You made it so easy for me, too."

"We did what we thought was right, Rick."

"That explains it okay, then," snarled Rick.

"It whitewashes the whole thing. Doesn't matter what you do to a guy as long as you think it's right. Right for whom, St. John? And if you say 'Mars' I'll beat your head off as soon as I land."

St. John's mouth tightened. Behind him, Eran Mak smiled and nodded. His golden eyes were bright.

"I never thought of you as a chicken, Rick," he said. "But here you come, home to roost. Too bad you have Mayo with you. I've got a feeling it would be much simpler just to shoot you down over the field."

"Uh huh," Rick said. "That's one reason I have her with me." The bells in the Martian's ears tinkled faintly, and Rick shuddered. "You better tell all those MPP boys to clear the air for me. I'm coming down."

"Better make it the landing field," St. John said. "You ruined the 'copter deck in the compound. We'll send a car for you."

"And an armed escort?"

"And an armed escort."

"I'm coming in peace," said Rick. "How I go out again is something you can worry about then."

St. John gave him a cold and level look, and nodded. The screen went dead. Mayo leaned back in her seat again and closed her eyes.

"Rick," she said quietly. "I love you. I'll go anywhere with you, do anything with you, except one thing. Think about it. Think hard, before you do anything."

"I've done nothing else but think, for a long time," Rick said.

They didn't speak after that. Rick swooped in to the old Company field where he had stolen the ship that wrecked Storm's plans, and made his landing. A car was waiting for them, with an escort of jeeps manned by Martian Government men. Rick submitted quietly to a polite but thorough search. They found no weapon on him.

They did not search Mayo.

The car sped smoothly away toward the compound. Rick glanced up at the distant towers of Ruh on the cliffs above the sea-bottom, and his eyes were as cold and depthless as amber glass.

Martian G-men, mostly soft-muscled political office-holders ushered them into the building. St. John was using in place of the now non-existent Administration pylon. St. John met them at the door of the office and persuaded the escort to go away. They didn't want to. They looked at Rick much as the men of Valkis had, but for a different reason. On the face of it they were outraged by the supposed sacrilege to the Collar of Ruh. In reality, they were worried about the new Union Government and what it was going to do to their jobs.

THEY did go away, however, leaving Rick and Mayo alone with St. John and Eran Mak. The Martian was lounging in his habitual position on the window sill, smoking and swinging the bells back and forth in his ear with a monotonous forefinger. He watched Rick through the smoke, his eyes yellow and unwinking as a hawk's.

St. John took Mayo in his arms. Rick turned away irritably, not wanting to see either of their faces. He let them talk, a few low words, while he sprawled out wearily in a big chair and got a cigarette going. He felt suddenly as old as Mars, and as tired.

"There are no words to thank you, Rick," St. John said presently. "This is a very strange situation. I'm grateful to you with all my heart, and yet I wish you weren't here. I'm afraid of you, and afraid of what may have to be done."

"At least you're honest about it," Rick said.

"There's no point in deception." St. John sat down behind a desk piled high with papers. He looked at the mess and sighed. "Reforming a new government out of what we have to work with is

no easy job. I've been over to Kahora several times, and Mak's been wearing his legs off running back and forth to Martian headquarters. I've stayed here because it seemed to be the focal point of all the trouble and I thought I could handle things better if I did. Also, the Company had to be taken care of. My heavens, the things Storm had been doing!"

Rick glanced almost lazily at St. John. "Yeah. You haven't got recognition and a charter yet from the Interplanetary Authority, have you?"

"Not yet. But there's no question that we will, considering the circumstances."

"That is, all the circumstances but one," replied Rick.

St. John nodded slowly. "That's what you came back for, isn't it?"

Rick jumped up. "My stars!" he roared. "What did you think I'd do? Who did all this anyway? Who was it sweated in these cursed mines, and took the beatings and the burnings and the kicks in the teeth?" He thrust his hands out. The bandages had come off, showing the raw new scars. "Was it you got pinned to the wall in Ruh, or me? Was it you that Beudach put the Collar on, or me? Was it you that talked the Marshies and the Earthmen into fighting together, into being blood brothers from here on out? Was it you stuck your neck out there in the Thieves' Quarter, maybe to get a knife in it, and was it you stole that ship and crashed it on top of Jaffa Storm?"

His voice was making the windows rattle. His face was blank and hard with fury, the veins like whipcords on his temples. He stopped suddenly and paced back and forth a little, and when he spoke again his voice was only a tight whisper.

"Damn—I've given too much, St. John," he said. "Blood and sweat and the fear of dying, while you were sitting on your hands, wishing. If you and Eran Mak think you can get rid of me with a crack on the head and fifty

thousand credits to show for it, you're crazy!" He laughed and swung around so he could face both of them. "Would you be satisfied, St. John? Would you, Mak?"

There was a long silence. Eran Mak smoked quietly, enigmatic as the seabottom outside.

"No, I don't suppose I would be," St. John said slowly, at last.

"The question," said Eran Mak, "is not whether you're satisfied, but whether or not you can do anything about getting satisfied."

Rick smiled.

"Tell 'em, about what's up there under the Polar domes, and what Storm was going to do with it," he said to Mayo.

She told them. But her eyes, like Eran Mak's were on Rick.

He gave them plenty of time to think it over. They didn't like it. The thought of all that power frightened them. St. John reached out once for the telescreen, and stopped.

"No, I wouldn't trust the Marshies that far just yet, if I were you," Rick said. "All right, so there's force there. But I don't have to use it."

"May I remind you that you're a prisoner here," Mak said.

"Sure. So was I on the Mary Ellen Dow. A guy goes through a certain number of things, and he gets so he doesn't care any more. Like I said, I don't have to use it.

HE WAS close behind Mayo now. Quite suddenly he caught her around the neck with one arm and held her while he snatched the tube out of the pocket where she had hidden it. Then he let her go and stepped back.

He aimed the tube at a chair. A little pink tongue licked out and touched it, and there was nothing but dust.

"Disintegrator," said Rick. "Now maybe you'd better get busy with the telescreen. A planet-wide hook-up, see? Maybe you'd better tell everybody just what happened here the night of the raid."

Mayo got up slowly and faced him.

"You know what that will mean," St. John said.

"Sure. Your geese will be pretty well fried, won't they? The fine altruistic saviors of Mars won't look so hot, eh?"

"Think a minute, Rick, before you do this," St. John said. "Men fight any way they can to win what they want. Believe it or not, Mak and I are honest. You have fifty thousand credits, remember."

"Not any more. They bought my way off the *Mary Ellen Dow*."

Eran Mak whistled. "So it meant that much to you! What will you take in place of Mars?"

"What could you give me in place of a world?" countered Rick.

They stood looking at him, St. John and Mayo and Eran Mak. He scowled, his jaw set stubbornly, his eyes hooded and sulk. He was careful that he should not see Mayo's face.

St. John sighed. He reached out, slowly like an old man, to press the connection on the telescreen.

"Wait!" Rick said hoarsely.

They stiffened, staring at him. There was sweat on his face and his hand trembled slightly.

"Wait," he said. "Listen. Yesterday Kyra died in Caer Hebra. She died smiling. She said she'd live again, in the new Mars, and remember that she helped make it. Helped make it—with me! And by God, I did do it. I pulled this messy dustball together and made it tick. Nobody else could have done it. Nobody but me!"

He paused and rubbed his eyes. "I don't know why I give a damn what Kyra said. I don't know whether she'll live again, or remember. But if she did—oh, rats! Mayo, come here."

She came. There was a glow starting back in her eyes.

"Listen, Mayo. Is this what the prophecy meant, my shadow over Mars? The shadow that's there now and will always be there, because I put Mars together with my two hands? I've been thinking, Mayo. I can get this world,

or at least I can make a blamed good try at it. I can milk it dry, maybe, but—well, there are other worlds, and I'm young yet, and I—” He pulled her close to him. “Does that make sense, Mayo? I'd rather have you than Mars. Like I told you once, you're part of me, and if I couldn't have you, I wouldn't care what else I had. You know something? All the time I was getting away to come back here, I wasn't really thinking of Mars, I was thinking of you.”

“I said you had a soul, if you could ever find it,” Mayo whispered.

Rick put his lips on hers. “Let's forget my soul. I found you.” His arms tightened.

St. John and Eran Mak turned away.

“Other worlds,” Rick murmured after a while. “There's always Outside—the Belt, and even Jupiter. Ships get better every year, and they need trail-breakers out there. Unless you want to stay here, without me.”

She stopped his lips with hers.

Rick started to laugh. “I guess I'm crazy. Looking at St. John over there, behind that desk all stacked up with papers, already getting bags under his eyes worrying about politics and charters and chiseling bums, I'm glad I don't have to. I got to thinking about that, too. Breaking trail is fine, but building the road afterward is just hard work, and somebody else can have it.”

He moved forward, holding Mayo tight in his arm. “Okay, you guys. You've got the grief. But don't think I'm through blackmailing you. I'm sticking you for the best blamed ship that flies, all fitted up, and a crew to match, and first trade rights for what I bring in from the Belt. And listen.” His voice dropped and he flushed uncomfortably.

“Just in case Kyra does come back—build a good road, will you? I'd kind of like her to remember me and think that my shadow over Mars was still a good one.”

• • •



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They looked down at the still, crumpled figures on the deck

DEATH SHIP

By RICHARD MATHESON

*The captain had lost all
authority . . . over his men,
over his ship, over his own soul
. . . in that strange limbo
which was a trick in Time!*

MASON saw it first.

He was sitting in front of the lateral viewer taking notes as the ship cruised over the new planet. His pen moved quickly over the graph-spaced chart he held before him. In a little while they'd land and take specimens. Mineral, vegetable, animal—if there were any. Put them in the storage lockers and take them back to Earth. There the technicians would evaluate, appraise,

judge. And, if everything was acceptable, stamp the big, black INHABITABLE on their brief and open another planet for colonization from overcrowded Earth.

Mason was jotting down items about general topography when the glitter caught his eye.

"I saw something," he said.

He flicked the viewer to reverse lensing position.

"Saw what?" Ross asked from the control board.

"Didn't you see a flash?"

Ross looked into his own screen.

"We went over a lake, you know," he said.

"No, it wasn't that." Mason said, "This was in that clearing beside the lake."

"I'll look," said Ross, "But it probably was the lake."

His fingers typed out a command on the board and the big ship wheeled around in a smooth arc and headed back.

"Keep your eyes open now," Ross said, "Make sure. We haven't got any time to waste."

"Yes sir."

Mason kept his unblinking gaze on the viewer, watching the earth below move past like a slowly rolled tapestry of woods and fields and rivers. He was thinking, in spite of himself, that maybe the moment had arrived at last. The moment in which Earthmen would come upon life beyond Earth, a race evolved from other cells and other muds. It was an exciting thought. 1997 might be the year. And he and Ross and Carter might now be riding a new *Santa Maria* of discovery, a silvery, bulleted galleon of space.

"There!" he said, "There it is!"

He looked over at Ross. The captain was gazing into his viewer plate. His face bore the expression Mason knew well. A look of smug analysis, of impending decision.

"What do you think it is?" Mason asked, playing the strings of vanity in his captain.

"Might be a ship, might not be," pronounced Ross.

WELL, for God's sake, let's go down and see, Mason wanted to say, but knew he couldn't. It would have to be Ross's decision. Otherwise they might not even stop.

"I guess it's nothing," he prodded.

He watched Ross impatiently, watched the stubby fingers flick buttons for the viewer. "We might stop," Ross said, "We have to take samples anyway. Only thing I'm afraid of is . . ."

He shook his head. Land, man! The words bubbled up in Mason's throat. For God's sake, let's go down!

Ross evaluated. His thickish lips pressed together appraisingly. Mason held his breath.

Then Ross's head bobbed once in that curt movement which indicated consummated decision. Mason breathed again. He watched the captain spin, push and twist dials. Felt the ship begin its tilt to upright position. Felt the cabin shuddering slightly as the gyroscope kept it on an even keel. The sky did a ninety degree turn, clouds appeared through the thick ports. Then the ship was pointed at the planet's sun and Ross switched off the cruising engines. The ship hesitated, suspended a split second, then began dropping toward the earth.

"Hey, we settin' down already?"

Mickey Carter looked at them questioningly from the port door that led to the storage lockers. He was rubbing greasy hands over his green jumper legs.

"We saw something down there," Mason said.

"No kiddin'," Mickey said, coming over to Mason's viewer, "Let's see."

Mason flicked on the rear lens. The two of them watched the planet billow up at them.

"I don't know whether you can . . . oh yes, there it is," Mason said. He looked over at Ross.

"Two degrees east," he said.

Ross twisted a dial and the ship then changed its downward movement slightly.

"What do you think it is?" Mickey asked.

"Hey!"

Mickey looked into the viewer with even greater interest. His wide eyes examined the shiny speck enlarging on the screen.

"Could be a ship," he said, "Could be."

Then he stood there silently, behind Mason, watching the earth rushing up.

"Reactors," said Mason.

Ross jabbed efficiently at the button and the ship's engines spouted out their flaming gasses. Speed decreased. The rocket eased down on its roaring fire jets. Ross guided.

"What do *you* think it is?" Mickey asked Mason.

"I don't know," Mason answered, "But if it's a ship," he added, half wishfully thinking, "I don't see how it could possibly be from Earth. We've got this run all to ourselves."

"Maybe they got off course," Mickey dampened without knowing.

Mason shrugged. "I doubt it," he said.

"What if it is a ship?" Mickey said, "And it's not ours?"

Mason looked at him and Carter licked his lips.

"Man," he said, "That'd be something."

"Air spring," Ross ordered.

MASON threw the switch that set the air spring into operation. The unit which made possible a landing without them having to stretch out on thick-cushioned couches. They could stand on deck and hardly feel the impact. It was an innovation on the newer government ships.

The ship hit on its rear braces.

There was a sensation of jarring, a sense of slight bouncing. Then the ship was still, its pointed nose straight up, glittering brilliantly in the bright sunlight.

"I want us to stay together," Ross was saying, "No one takes any risks, that's an order."

He got up from his seat and pointed at the wall switch that let atmosphere into the small chamber in the corner of the cabin.

"Three to one we need our helmets," Mickey said to Mason.

"You're on," Mason said, setting into play their standing bet about the air or lack of it in every new planet they found. Mickey always bet on the need for apparatus. Mason for unaided lung use. So far, they'd come out about even.

Mason threw the switch, and there was a muffled sound of hissing in the chamber. Mickey got the helmet from his locker and dropped it over his head. Then he went through the double doors. Mason listened to him clamping the doors behind him. He kept wanting to switch on the side viewers and see if he could locate what they'd spotted. But he didn't. He let himself enjoy the delicate nibbling of suspense.

Through the intercom they heard Mickey's voice.

"Removing helmet," he said.

Silence. They waited. Finally, a sound of disgust.

"I lose again," Mickey said.

The others followed him out.

"God, did they hit!"

Mickey's face had an expression of dismayed shock on it. The three of them stood there on the greenish-blue grass and looked.

It was a ship. Or what was left of a ship for, apparently, it had struck the earth at terrible velocity, nose first. The main structure had driven itself about fifteen feet into the hard ground. Jagged pieces of superstructure had been ripped off by the crash and were lying strewn over the field. The heavy engines had been torn loose and nearly crushed the cabin. Everything was deathly silent, and the wreckage was so complete they could hardly make out what type of ship it was. It was as if some enormous child had lost fancy with

the toy model and had dashed it to earth, stamped on it, banged on it insanely with a rock.

Mason shuddered. It had been a long time since he'd seen a rocket crash. He'd almost forgotten the ever-present menace of lost control, of whistling fast through space, of violent impact. Most talk had been about being lost in an orbit. This reminded him of the other threat in his calling. His throat moved unconsciously as he watched.

Ross was scuffing at a chunk of metal at his feet.

"Can't tell much," he said, "But I'd say it's our own."

Mason was about to speak, then changed his mind.

"From what I can see of that engine up there, I'd say it was ours," Mickey said.

"Rocket structure might be standard," Mason heard himself say, "Everywhere."

"Not a chance," Ross said, "Things don't work out like that. It's ours all right. Some poor devils from Earth. Well, at least their death was quick."

"Was it?" Mason asked the air, visualizing the crew in their cabin, rooted with fear as their ship spun toward earth, maybe straight down like a fired cannon shell, maybe end-over-end like a crazy, fluttering top, the gyroscope trying in vain to keep the cabin always level.

The screaming, the shouted commands, the exhortations to a heaven they had never seen before, to a God who might be in another universe. And then the planet rushing up and blasting its hard face against their ship, crushing them, ripping the breath from their lungs. He shuddered again, thinking of it.

"Let's take a look," Mickey said.

"Not sure we'd better," Ross said, "We say it's ours. It might not be."

"Jeez, you don't think anything is still alive in there, do you?" Mickey asked the captain.

"Can't say," Ross said.

BUT they all knew he could see that mangled hulk before him as well as they. Nothing could have survived that.

The look. The pursed lips. As they circled the ship. The head movement, unseen by them.

"Let's try that opening there," Ross ordered, "And stay together. We still have work to do. Only doing this so we can let the base know which ship this is." He had already decided it was an Earth ship.

They walked up to a spot in the ship's side where the skin had been laid open along the welded seam. A long, thick plate was bent over as easily as a man might bend paper.

"Don't like this," Ross said, "But I suppose . . ."

He gestured with his head and Mickey pulled himself up to the opening. He tested each handhold gingerly, then slid on his work gloves as he found some sharp edge. He told the other two and they reached into their jumper pockets. Then Mickey took a long step into the dark maw of the ship.

"Hold on, now!" Ross called up. "Wait until I get there."

He pulled himself up, his heavy boot toes scraping up the rocket skin. He went into the hole too. Mason followed.

It was dark inside the ship. Mason closed his eyes for a moment to adjust to the change. When he opened them, he saw two bright beams searching up through the twisted tangle of beams and plates. He pulled out his own flash and flicked it on.

"God, is this thing wrecked," Mickey said, awed by the sight of metal and machinery in violent death. His voice echoed slightly through the shell. Then, when the sound ended, an utter stillness descended on them. They stood in the murky light and Mason could smell the acrid fumes of broken engines.

"Watch the smell, now," Ross said to Mickey who was reaching up for support, "We don't want to get ourselves gassed."

"I will," Mickey said. He was climb-

ing up, using one hand to pull his thick, powerful body up along the twisted ladder. He played the beam straight up.

"Cabin is all out of shape," he said, shaking his head.

Ross followed him up. Mason was last, his flash moving around endlessly over the snapped joints, the wild jigsaw of destruction that had once been a powerful new ship. He kept hissing in disbelief to himself as his beam came across one violent distortion of metal after another.

"Door's sealed," Mickey said, standing on a pretzel-twisted catwalk, bracing himself against the inside rocket wall. He grabbed the handle again and tried to pull it open.

"Give me your light," Ross said. He directed both beams at the door and Mickey tried to drag it open. His face grew red as he struggled. He puffed.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "It's stuck."

Mason came up beside them. "Maybe the cabin is still pressurized," he said softly. He didn't like the echoing of his own voice.

"Doubt it," Ross said, trying to think, "More than likely the jamb is twisted." He gestured with his head again. "Help Carter."

Mason grabbed one handle and Mickey the other. Then they braced their feet against the wall and pulled with all their strength. The door held fast. They shifted their grip, pulled harder.

"Hey, it slipped!" Mickey said, "I think we got it."

They resumed footing on the tangled catwalk and pulled the door open. The frame was twisted, the door held in one corner. They could only open it enough to wedge themselves in sideways.

The cabin was dark as Mason edged in first. He played his light beam toward the pilot's seat. It was empty. He heard Mickey squeeze in as he moved the light to the navigator's seat.

There was no navigator's seat. The bulkhead had been stoved in there, the viewer, the table and the chair all

crushed beneath the bent plates. There was a clicking in Mason's throat as he thought of himself sitting at a table like that, in a chair like that before a bulkhead like that.

Ross was in now. The three beams of light searched. They all had to stand, legs spraddled, because the deck slanted.

And the way it slanted made Mason think of something. Of shifting weights, of *things* sliding down. . . .

Into the corner where he suddenly played his shaking beam.

And felt his heart jolt, felt the skin on him crawling, felt his unblinking eyes staring at the sight. Then felt his boots thud him down the incline as if he were driven.

"Here," he said, his voice hoarse with shock.

He stood before the bodies. His foot had bumped into one of them as he held himself from going down any further, as he shifted his weight on the incline.

Now he heard Mickey's footsteps, his voice. A whisper. A bated, horrified whisper.

"Mother of God."

Nothing from Ross. Nothing from any of them then but stares and shuddering breaths.

Because the twisted bodies on the floor were theirs, all three of them. And all three . . . dead.

MASON didn't know how long they stood there, wordlessly, looking down at the still, crumpled figures on the deck.

How does a man react when he is standing over his own corpse? The question plied unconsciously at his mind. What does a man say? What are his first words to be? A poser, he seemed to sense, a loaded question.

But it was happening. Here he stood—and there he lay dead at his own feet. He felt his hands grow numb and he rocked unsteadily on the tilted deck.

"God."

Mickey again. He had his flash pointed down at his own face. His mouth

twitched as he looked. All three of them had their flash beams directed at their own faces, and the bright ribbons of light connected their dual bodies.

Finally Ross took a shaking breath of the stale cabin air.

"Carter," he said, "find the auxiliary light switch, see if it works." His voice was husky and tightly restrained.

"Sir?"

"The light switch—the light switch!" Ross snapped.

Mason and the captain stood there, motionless, as Mickey shuffled up the deck. They heard his boots kick metallic debris over the deck surface. Mason closed his eyes, but was unable to take his foot away from where it pressed against the body that was his. He felt bound.

"I don't understand," he said to himself.

"Hang on," Ross said.

Mason couldn't tell whether it was said to encourage him or the captain himself.

Then they heard the emergency generator begin its initial whining spin. The lights flickered, went out. The generator coughed and began humming and the lights flashed on brightly.

They looked down now. Mickey slipped down the slight deck hill and stood beside them. He stared down at his own body. Its head was crushed in. Mickey drew back, his mouth a box of unbelieving terror.

"I don't get it," he said, "I don't get it, what is this?"

"Carter," Ross said.

"That's *me!*" Mickey said, "God, it's *me!*"

"Hold on!" Ross ordered.

"The three of us," Mason said quietly, "and we're all dead."

There seemed nothing to be said. It was a speechless nightmare. The tilted cabin all bashed in and tangled. The three corpses all doubled over and tumbled into one corner, arms and legs flopped over each other. All they could do was stare.

Then Ross said, "Go get a tarp. Both of you."

Mason turned. Quickly. Glad to fill his mind with simple command. Glad to crowd out tense horror with activity. He took long steps up the deck. Mickey backed up, unable to take his unblinking gaze off the heavy-set corpse with the green jumper and the caved-in, bloody head.

Mason dragged a heavy, folded tarp from the storage locker and carried it back into the cabin, legs and arms moving in robotlike sequence. He tried to numb his brain, not think at all until the first shock had dwindled.

Mickey and he opened up the heavy canvas sheet with wooden motions. They tossed it out and the thick, shiny material fluttered down over the bodies. It settled, outlining the heads, the torsos, the one arm that stood up stiffly like a spear, bent over wrist and hand like a grisly pennant.

Mason turned away with a shudder. He stumbled up to the pilot's seat and slumped down. He stared at his outstretched legs, the heavy boots. He reached out and grabbed his leg and pinched it, feeling almost relief at the flaring pain.

"Come away," he heard Ross saying to Mickey, "I said *come away!*"

HE LOOKED down and saw Ross half dragging Mickey up from a crouching position over the bodies. He held Mickey's arm and led him up the incline.

"We're dead," Mickey said hollowly, "That's us on the deck. We're *dead.*"

Ross pushed Mickey up to the cracked port and made him look out.

"There," he said, "There's our ship over there. Just as we left it. This ship isn't ours. And those bodies. They . . . can't be ours."

He finished weakly. To a man of his sturdy opinionation, the words sounded flimsy and extravagant. His throat moved, his lower lip pushed out in defiance of this enigma. Ross didn't like enigmas. He stood for decision and ac-

tion. He wanted action now.

"You saw yourself down there," Mason said to him, "Are you going to say it isn't you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Ross bristled, "This may seem crazy, but there's an explanation for it. There's an explanation for everything."

His face twitched as he punched his bulky arm.

"This is me," he claimed, "I'm solid." He glared at them as if daring opposition. "I'm alive," he said.

They stared blankly at him.

"I don't get it," Mickey said weakly. He shook his head and his lips drew back over his teeth.

Mason sat limply in the pilot's seat. He almost hoped that Ross's dogmatism would pull them through this. That his staunch bias against the inexplicable would save the day. He wanted for it to save the day. He tried to think for himself, but it was so much easier to let the captain decide.

"We're all dead," Mickey said.

"Don't be a fool!" Ross exclaimed, "Feel yourself!"

Mason wondered how long it would go on. Actually, he began to expect a sudden awakening, him jolting to a sitting position on his bunk to see the two of them at their tasks as usual, the crazy dream over and done with.

But the dream went on. He leaned back in the seat and it was a solid seat. From where he sat he could run his fingers over solid dials and buttons and switches. All real. It was no dream. Pinching wasn't even necessary.

"Maybe it's a vision," he tried, vainly attempting thought, like an animal mired tries hesitant steps to solid earth.

"That's enough," Ross said.

Then his eyes narrowed. He looked at them sharply. His face mirrored decision. Mason almost felt anticipation. He tried to figure out what Ross was working on. Vision? No, it couldn't be that. Ross would hold no truck with visions. He noticed Mickey staring open-mouthed at Ross. Mickey wanted the consoling of

simple explanation too.

"Time warp," said Ross.

They still stared at him.

"What?" Mason asked.

"Listen," Ross punched out his theory. More than his theory, for Ross never bothered with that link in the chain of calculation. His certainty.

"Space bends," Ross said, "Time and space form a continuum. Right?"

No answer. He didn't need one.

"Remember they told us once in training of the possibility of circumnavigating time. They told us we could leave Earth at a certain time. And when we came back we'd be back a year earlier than we'd calculated. Or a year later.

"Those were just theories to the teachers. Well, I say it's happened to us. It's logical, it could happen. We could have passed right through a time warp. We're in another galaxy, maybe different space lines, maybe different time lines."

He paused for effect.

"I say we're in the future," he said.

Mason looked at him.

"How does that help us?" he asked, "If you're right."

"We're not dead!" Ross seemed surprised that they didn't get it.

"If it's in the future," Mason said quietly, "Then we're going to die."

ROSS gaped at him. He hadn't thought of that. Hadn't thought that his idea made things even worse. Because there was only one thing worse than dying. And that was knowing you were going to die. And where. And how.

Mickey shook his head. His hands fumbled at his sides. He raised one to his lips and chewed nervously on a blackened nail.

"No," he said weakly, "I don't get it."

Ross stood looking at Mason with jaded eyes. He bit his lips, feeling nervous with the unknown crowding him in, holding off the comfort of solid, rational thinking. He pushed, he shoved it away. He persevered.

"Listen," he said, "We're agreed that

those bodies aren't ours."

No answer.

"Use your heads!" Ross commanded, "Feel yourself!"

Mason ran numbed fingers over his jumper, his helmet, the pen in his pocket. He clasped solid hands of flesh and bone. He looked at the veins in his arms. He pressed an anxious finger to his pulse. It's true, he thought. And the thought drove lines of strength back into him. Despite all, despite Ross's desperate advocacy, he was alive. Flesh and blood were his evidence.

His mind swung open then. His brow furrowed in thought as he straightened up. He saw a look almost of relief on the face of a weakening Ross.

"All right then," he said, "We're in the future."

Mickey stood tensely by the port. "Where does that leave us?" he asked.

The words threw Mason back. It was true, where did it leave them?

"How do we know how distant a future?" he said, adding weight to the depression of Mickey's words, "How do we know it isn't in the next twenty minutes?"

Ross tightened. He punched his palm with a resounding smack.

"How do we know?" he said strongly, "We don't go up, we can't crash. That's how we know."

Mason looked at him.

"Maybe if we went up," he said, "we might bypass our death altogether and leave it in this space-time system. We could get back to the space-time system of our own galaxy and . . ."

His words trailed off. His brain became absorbed with twisting thought.

Ross frowned. He stirred restlessly, licked his lips. What had been simple was now something else again. He resented the uninvited intrusion of complexity.

"We're alive now," he said, getting it set in his mind, consolidating assurance with reasonable words, "And there's only one way we can stay alive."

He looked at them, decision reached.

"We have to stay here," he said.

They just looked at him. He wished that one of them, at least, would agree with him, show some sign of definition in their minds.

"But . . . what about our orders?" Mason said vaguely.

"Our orders don't tell us to kill ourselves!" Ross said, "No, it's the only answer. If we never go up again, we never crash. We . . . we avoid it, we prevent it!"

His head jarred once in a curt nod. To Ross, the thing was settled.

Mason shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, "I don't. . ."

"I do," Ross stated, "Now let's get out of here. This ship is getting on your nerves."

Mason stood up as the captain gestured toward the door. Mickey started to move, then hesitated. He looked down at the bodies.

"Shouldn't we . . . ?" he started to inquire.

"What, what?" Ross asked, impatient to leave.

Mickey stared at the bodies. He felt caught up in a great, bewildering insanity.

"Shouldn't we . . . bury ourselves?" he said.

Ross swallowed. He would hear no more. He herded them out of the cabin. Then, as they started down through the wreckage, he looked in at the door. He looked at the tarpaulin with the jumbled mound of bodies beneath it. He pressed his lips together until they were white.

"I'm alive," he muttered, angrily.

Then he turned out the cabin light with tight, vengeful fingers and left.

THEY all sat in the cabin of their own ship. Ross had ordered food brought out from the lockers, but he was the only one eating. He ate with a belligerent rotation of his jaw as though he would grind away all mystery with his teeth.

Mickey stared at the food.

"How long do we have to stay?" he

asked, as if he didn't clearly realize that they were to remain permanently.

Mason took it up. He leaned forward in his seat and looked at Ross.

"How long will our food last?" he said.

"There's edible food outside, I've no doubt," Ross said, chewing.

"How will we know which is edible and which is poisonous?"

"We'll watch the animals," Ross persisted.

"They're a different type of life," Mason said, "What they can eat might be poisonous to us. Besides, we don't even know if there are any animals here."

The words made his lips raise in a brief, bitter smile. And he'd actually been hoping to contact another people. It was practically humorous.

Ross bristled. "We'll . . . cross each river as we come to it," he blurted out as if he hoped to smother all complaint with this ancient homily.

Mason shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

Ross stood up.

"Listen," he said, "It's easy to ask questions. We've all made a decision to stay here. Now let's do some concrete thinking about it. Don't tell me what we can't do. I know that as well as you. Tell me what we can do."

Then he turned on his heel and stalked over to the control board. He stood there glaring at blank-faced gauges and dials. He sat down and began scribbling rapidly in his log as if something of great note had just occurred to him. Later Mason looked at what Ross had written and saw that it was a long paragraph which explained in faulty but unyielding logic why they were all alive.

Mickey got up and sat down on his bunk. He pressed his large hands against his temples. He looked very much like a little boy who had eaten too many green apples against his mother's injunction and who feared retribution on both counts. Mason knew what Mickey was thinking. Of that stiff body with the skull forced in. The image of himself

brutally killed in collision. He, Mason, was thinking of the same thing. And, behavior to the contrary, Ross probably was too.

Mason stood by the port looking out at the silent hulk across the meadow. Darkness was falling. The last rays of the planet's sun glinted off the skin of the crashed rocket ship. Mason turned away. He looked at the outside temperature gauge. Already it was seven degrees and it was still light. Mason moved the thermostat needle with his right forefinger.

Heat being used up, he thought. The energy of our grounded ship being used up faster and faster. The ship drinking its own blood with no possibility of transfusion. Only operation would recharge the ship's energy system. And they were without motion, trapped and stationary.

"How long can we last?" he asked Ross again, refusing to keep silence in the face of the question, "We can't live in this ship indefinitely. The food will run out in a couple of months. And a long time before that the charging system will go, the heat will stop. We'll freeze to death."

"How do we know the outside temperature will freeze us?" Ross asked, falsely patient.

"It's only sundown," Mason said, "And already it's . . . minus thirteen degrees."

Ross looked at him sullenly. Then he pushed up from his chair and began pacing.

"If we go up," he said, "We risk . . . duplicating that ship over there."

"But would we?" Mason wondered, "We can only die once. It seems we already have. In this galaxy. Maybe a person can die once in every galaxy. Maybe that's afterlife. Maybe . . ."

"Are you through?" asked Ross coldly.

Mickey looked up.

"Let's go," he said, "I don't want to hang around here."

He looked at Ross.

Ross said, "Let's not stick out our necks before we know what we're doing."

Let's think this out."

"I have a wife!" Mickey said angrily, "Just because you're not married—"

"Shut up!" Ross thundered.

MICKEY threw himself on the bunk and turned to face the cold bulkhead. Breath shuddered through his heavy frame. He didn't say anything. His fingers opened and closed on the blanket, twisting it, pulling it out from under his body.

Ross paced the deck, abstractedly punching at his palm with a hard fist. His teeth clicked together, his head shook as one argument after another fell before his bullheaded determination. He stopped, looked at Mason, then started pacing again. Once he turned on the outside spotlight and looked to make sure it was not imagination.

The light illumined the broken ship. It glowed strangely like a huge, broken tombstone. Ross snapped off the spotlight with a soundless snarl. He turned to face them. His broad chest rose and fell heavily as he breathed.

"All right," he said, "It's *your* lives too. I can't decide for all of us. We'll hand vote on it. That thing out there may be something entirely different from what we think. If you two think it's worth the risk of our lives to go up we'll . . . go up."

He shrugged. "Vote," he said, "I say we stay here."

"I say we go," Mason said.

They looked at Mickey.

"Carter," said Ross, "What's your vote?"

Mickey looked over his shoulders with bleak eyes.

"Vote," Ross said.

"Up," Mickey said, "Take us up. I'd rather die than stay here."

Ross's throat moved. Then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"All right," he said, quietly, "We'll go up."

"God have mercy on us," Mickey muttered as Ross went quickly to the control board.

The captain hesitated a moment. Then he threw switches. The great ship began shuddering as gasses ignited and began to pour like channeled lightning from the rear vents. The sound was almost soothing to Mason. He didn't care anymore, he was willing, like Mickey, to take a chance. It had only been a few hours. It had seemed like a year. Minutes had dragged, each one weighted with oppressive recollections. Of the bodies they'd seen, of the shattered rock-ets—even more of the Earth they would never see, of parents and wives and sweethearts and children. Lost to their sight forever. No, it was far better to try and get back. Sitting and waiting was always the hardest thing for a man to do. He was no longer conditioned for it.

Mason sat down at his board. He waited tensely. He heard Mickey jump up and move over to the engine control board.

"I'm going to take us up easy," Ross said to them, "There's no reason why we should . . . have any trouble."

He paused. They snapped their heads over and looked at him with muscle-tight impatience.

"Are you both ready?" Ross asked.

"Take us up," Mickey said.

Ross jammed his lips together and shoved over the switch that read: *Vertical Rise*.

They felt the ship tremble, hesitate. Then it moved off the ground, headed up with increasing velocity. Mason flicked on the rear viewer. He watched the dark earth recede, tried not to look at the white patch in the corner of the screen, the patch that shone metallically under the moonlight.

"Five hundred," he read, "Seven fifty . . . one thousand . . . fifteen hundred. . . ."

He kept waiting. For explosion. For an engine to give out. For their rise to stop.

They kept moving up.

"Three thousand," Mason said, his voice beginning to betray the rising

sense of elation he felt. The planet was getting further and further away. The other ship was only a memory now. He looked across at Mickey. Mickey was staring, open-mouthed as if he was about ready to shout out "*Hurry!*" but was afraid to tempt the fates.

"Six thousand . . . *seven thousand!*" Mason's voice was jubilant, "We're out of it!"

Mickey's face broke into a great, relieved grin. He ran a hand over his brow and flicked great drops of sweat on the deck.

"God," he said, gasping, "My God."

Mason moved over to Ross's seat. He clapped the captain on the shoulder.

"We made it," he said. "Nice flying."

Ross looked irritated.

"We shouldn't have left," he said, "It was nothing all the time. Now we have to start looking for another planet." He shook his head. "It wasn't a good idea to leave," he said.

Mason stared at him. He turned away shaking his head, thinking . . . you can't win.

"If I ever see another glitter," he thought aloud, "I'll keep my big mouth shut. To hell with alien races anyway."

SILENCE. He went back to his seat and picked up his graph chart. He let out a long shaking breath. Let Ross complain, he thought, I can take anything now. Things are normal again. He began to figure casually what might have occurred down there on that planet.

Then he happened to glance at Ross.

Ross was thinking. His lips were pressed together. He said something to himself. Mason found the captain looking at him.

"Mason," he said.

"What?"

"Alien race, you said."

Mason felt a chill flood through his body. He saw the big head nod once in decision. Unknown decision. His hands started to shake. A crazy idea came. No, Ross wouldn't do that, not just to assuage vanity. Would he?

"I don't . . ." he started. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mickey watching the captain too.

"Listen," Ross said, "I'll tell you what happened down there. I'll *show* you what happened!"

They stared at him in paralyzing horror as he threw the ship around and headed back.

"What are you doing!" Mickey cried.

"Listen," Ross said, "Didn't you understand me? Don't you see how we've been tricked?"

They looked at him without comprehension. Mickey took a step toward him.

"Alien race," Ross said, "That's the short of it. That time-space idea is all wet. But I'll tell you what idea isn't all wet. So we leave the place. What's our first instinct as far as reporting it? Saying it's uninhabitable? We'd do more than that. We wouldn't report it at all."

"Ross, you're not taking us back!" Mason said, standing up suddenly as the full terror of returning struck him.

"You bet I am!" Ross said, fiercely elated.

"You're crazy!" Mickey shouted at him, his body twitching, his hands clenched at his sides menacingly.

"Listen to me!" Ross roared at them, "Who would be benefited by us not reporting the existence of that planet!"

They didn't answer. Mickey moved closer.

"Fools!" he said, "Isn't it obvious? There *is* life down there. But life that isn't strong enough to kill us or chase us away with force. So what can they do? They don't want us there. So what can they do?"

He asked them like a teacher who cannot get the right answers from the dolts in his class.

Mickey looked suspicious. But he was curious now, too, and a little timorous as he had always been with his captain, except in moments of greatest physical danger. Ross had always led them, and it was hard to rebel against it even when it seemed he was trying to kill them all. His eyes moved to the viewer

screen where the planet began to loom beneath them like a huge dark ball.

"We're alive," Ross said, "And I say there never *was* a ship down there. We saw it, sure. We *ouched* it. But you can see anything if you believe it's there! All your senses can tell you there's something when there's nothing. All you have to do is *believe* it!"

"What are you getting at?" Mason asked, hurriedly, too frightened to realize. His eyes fled to the altitude gauge. Seventeen thousand . . . sixteen thousand . . . sixteen fifty. . . .

"Telepathy," Ross said, triumphantly decisive, "I say those men or whatever they are, saw us coming. And they didn't want us there. So they read our minds and saw the death fear, and they decided that the best way to scare us away was to show us our ship crashed and ourselves dead in it. And it worked . . . until now."

"So it worked!" Mason exploded, "Are you going to take a chance on killing us just to prove your damn theory!"

"It's *more* than a theory!" Ross stormed, as the ship fell, then Ross added with the distorted argument of injured vanity, "My orders say to pick up specimens from every planet. I've always followed orders before and, by God, I still will!"

"You saw how cold it was!" Mason said, "No one can live there anyway! Use your head, Ross!"

"Damn it, I'm captain of this ship!" Ross yelled, "And I give the orders!"

"Not when our lives are in your hands!" Mickey started for the captain. "Get back!" Ross ordered.

That was when one of the ship's engines stopped and the ship yawed wildly.

"You fool!" Mickey exploded, thrown off balance, "You *did* it, you *did* it!"

OUTSIDE the black night hurtled past. The ship wobbled violently. *Prediction true* was the only phrase Mason could think of. His own vision of the screaming, the numbing horror, the exhortations to a deaf heaven—all com-

ing true. That hulk would be this ship in a matter of minutes. Those three bodies would be. . . .

"Oh . . . *damn!*" He screamed it at the top of his lungs, furious at the enraging stubbornness of Ross in taking them back, of causing the future to be as they saw—all because of insane pride.

"No, they're not going to fool us!" Ross shouted, still holding fast to his last idea like a dying bulldog holding its enemy fast in its teeth.

He threw switches and tried to turn the ship. But it wouldn't turn. It kept plunging down like a fluttering leaf. The gyroscope couldn't keep up with the abrupt variations in cabin equilibrium and the three of them found themselves being thrown off balance on the tilting deck.

"Auxiliary engines!" Ross yelled.

"It's no use!" Mickey cried.

"*Damn it!*" Ross clawed his way up the angled deck, then crashed heavily against the engine board as the cabin inclined the other way. He threw switches over with shaking fingers.

Suddenly Mason saw an even spout of flame through the rear viewer again. The ship stopped shuddering and headed straight down. The cabin righted itself.

Ross threw himself into his chair and shot out furious hands to turn the ship about. From the floor Mickey looked at him with a blank, white face. Mason looked at him too, afraid to speak.

"Now shut up!" Ross said disgustedly, not even looking at them, talking like a disgruntled father to his sons, "When we get down there you're going to see that it's true. That ship'll be gone. And we're going to go looking for those bastards who put the idea in our minds!"

They both stared at their captain humbly as the ship headed down backwards. They watched Ross's hands move efficiently over the controls. Mason felt a sense of confidence in his captain. He stood on the deck quietly, waiting for

the landing without fear. Mickey got up from the floor and stood beside him, waiting.

The ship hit the ground. It stopped. They had landed again. They were still the same. And . . .

"Turn on the spotlight," Ross told them.

Mason threw the switch. They all crowded to the port. Mason wondered for a second how Ross could possibly have landed in the same spot. He hadn't even appeared to be following the calculations made on the last landing.

They looked out.

Mickey stopped breathing. And Ross's mouth fell open.

The wreckage was still there.

They had landed in the same place and they had found the wrecked ship still there. Mason turned away from the port and stumbled over the deck. He felt lost, a victim of some terrible universal prank, a man accursed.

"You said . . ." Mickey said to the captain.

Ross just looked out of the port with unbelieving eyes.

"Now we'll go up again," Mickey said, grinding his teeth. "And we'll *really*

crash this time. And we'll be killed. Just like those . . . those. . . ."

Ross didn't speak. He stared out of the port at the refutation of his last clinging hope. He felt hollow, void of all faith in belief in sensible things.

Then Mason spoke.

"We're not going to crash—" he said somberly—"never."

"What?"

Mickey was looking at him. Ross turned and looked too.

"Why don't we stop kidding ourselves?" Mason said, "We all know what it is, don't we?"

He was thinking of what Ross had said just a moment before. About the senses giving evidence of what was believed. Even if there was nothing there at all. . . .

Then, in a split second, with the knowledge, he saw Ross and he saw Carter. As they *were*. And he took a short, shuddering breath, a last breath until illusion would bring breath and flesh again.

"Progress," he said bitterly and his voice was an aching whisper in the phantom ship. "The Flying Dutchman takes to the universe."



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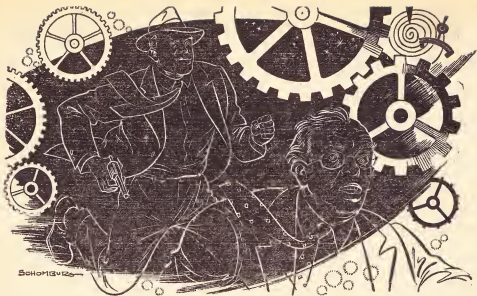
DEVILS FROM DARKONIA

and

BATTLE OF THE BRAINS



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De Witt ran after Hedges and spun his setter at the same time

The Best Laid Scheme

By L. SPRAGUE DeCAMP

*Flower-gardener and poet, they
ran a cloak-and-dagger race
through Time. . .*

RUSSELL F. R. HEDGES did not look like a world destroyer. He was in fact an almost annoyingly harmless-looking soul, a plump person of forty-five in a neat blue serge, with dark hair streaked with gray and in need of cutting hanging down over his steel-rimmed glasses.

The folly of trying to judge people by their looks has been pointed out by generations of psychologists and such people. But this form of judgment seems to be ingrained in human folkways. Per-

haps that is why Co-ordinator Ronald Q. M. Bloss underestimated Hedges. When the chief executive officer of the great North American continent is told by the head of the Bureau of Standards to do thus-and-so, thus-and-so being a program designed to put the affairs of the continent in the said head's hand, the co-ordinator's natural reaction is to ring the buzzer and have the erring subordinate carted off to the hatch.

Bloss was curious. Finger poised over the button, he asked, "How, my dear Hedges, do you propose to destroy the world?"

Hedges smiled amiably. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, suspecting my dear Bloss." (He was being off-
the presence of dictaphones, "Simple,

sively familiar; people normally addressed the co-ordinator as "Your Efficiency.") "You recall my investigations into the nature of Time. The process of temporal forward-jumping, vulgarly known as vanwinkling, has been an established fact for several decades, being a favorite occupation among those who are dissatisfied with the present world and want a better one in the future."

"I know all that," said Bloss irritably.

"You may as well calm yourself, my dear Bloss. Being in a position to be as verbose in my explanations as I please, I intend to indulge my whims in that direction. As I was about to say, the problem of backward-jumping has not hitherto been solved. It involves an obvious paradox. If I go back and slay my own grandfather, what becomes of me? It's all very well to say he wasn't killed, and that something will happen to prevent my carrying out my design. Who shall see to it that my design is in fact frustrated, once I have actually gotten back to his time and located him?"

"Yet, if I kill him, I obviously disarrange subsequent history. Subsequent history is a tough fabric, and will no doubt try to adhere to its original pattern. I doubt that it will altogether succeed in doing so. In fact, any action on my part in by-gone times that effects other persons will set in train a series of events that will ultimately wrench subsequent history out of its normal channels. Someone will marry or fail to marry the spouse he would otherwise have chosen, and a great statesman will be born or will fail to be born, as the case may be.

"So, all I have to do is go far enough back, commit a few sufficiently significant acts, and presto! you and all the other inhabitants of the continent cease to be; or rather, you cease to be the persons you now are. Do you see, my dear Bloss?"

Bloss thought he saw very well. He pressed the button.

Hedges saw him do so. The Chief of the Bureau of Standards looked at his

wrist watch. It was a large wrist watch, with a lot of buttons and gadgets around its circumference. His fingers moved to one of these.

"Ah, well," he said, "it seems a demonstration is needed." And he vanished.

When the guards bounced in three seconds later, they found a worried-looking co-ordinator. He was not especially disturbed over Hedges' vanishment—he'd seen people do that before when they vanwinkled—but he was wondering if by some remote chance the man might not have actually gone back instead of forward.

HE SENT for Vincent M. S. Collingwood, head of the Continental Bureau of Investigation.

Collingwood pulled a sheaf of papers out of his briefcase. "Hah!" he said. "Here are the files on Russell F. R. Hedges. Our staff psychologist has him down as 'shrewd, ambitious, resourceful, and persevering beneath a deceptively mild exterior'." Collingwood fixed his chief with a glittering eye. "That, Your Efficiency, is what I call sinister!"

"I don't know," said Bloss. "Maybe I'm foolish to get excited; maybe he was bluffing and did a vanwinkle on us."

"Hah!" grated Collingwood. "But did he? If it was an ordinary vanwinkle, he'd be stranded in the future and unable to get back. No, I'm sure there's a dastardly plot behind this."

Bloss began, "If—" He stopped with his mouth open. Through the White House ran a silent, motionless earthquake, if you can imagine such a thing.

Bloss stared at the wall behind Collingwood. "That picture," he said.

Collingwood scowled at the blank wall. "I don't see any picture."

"That's just it. It was there a second ago. And you are wearing a different necktie."

"Hah! So I was. This *is* sinister. He's gone back and done something—it doesn't matter much what—and changed subsequent history. Hah!"

"Stop saying 'hah' all the time," com-

plained Bloss. "I want you to do something."

"Hah, you don't have to worry about my doing something, Your Efficiency. Doing something is just my job."

"Well, what did you have in mind?"

"Why—uh—I don't just know. But don't worry."

"But I am worrying. Can't you at least put some of your men to following Hedges?"

"Of course, Your Efficiency," cried Collingwood. "Just what I had in mind. I'll put de Witt after him. He's the toughest man we have. Besides, he has an artificial eye."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Hah! Wouldn't you like to know!"

Hedges popped back into sight, in the chair just recently vacated by Collingwood. Bloss jumped. "Ah, my dear Bloss," said Hedges. "The demonstration was convincing I trust?"

"Uh-huh," said Bloss warily. "What do you want me to do now?"

"I've told you already. Force a bill through, giving the head of the Bureau of Standards the powers I enumerated."

"All right. But it will take time to prepare it and to get it passed."

"I know that. I'm in no rush. I shall continue with my usual duties. You will of course not try anything so rash as to have me arrested—or assaulted. If you do, I shall go back quite a way, and I shall devote my efforts particularly to your own ancestors, all of whom I have looked up to be sure I can locate them. Good day, Your Efficiency."

Bloss watched him leave in a more conventional manner. The co-ordinator thought of telling Collingwood to dispose of Hedges in any way he chose, so long as Hedges was gotten rid of. But he hesitated. He was a stickler for legality, and the assassination of inconvenient citizens without due process of law was highly felonious in the North America of 2365. Besides, there was an election coming up, and his opponents would be sure to find his sins out and use them.

Now, there was an even better reason

for preserving Hedges' immunity: if the C. B. I. attacked Hedges with gun or blackjack, but were not successful at the very first try, Hedges would disappear into the past, and would, in revenge, do something really drastic to the fabric of history. Maybe Bloss would find himself no longer co-ordinator—or no longer Bloss. As Bloss had considerable affection for himself, the thought of such separation was painful.

MEANWHILE, Vincent M. S. Collingwood had called in his toughest operative, Mendez S. D. de Witt. This de Witt was in disgrace for having killed a man—he said it had been necessary to keep the man from escaping; others said it hadn't been. Nothing had been done to de Witt, but he was made to feel that he'd have to go some to get back in the Department's graces. He was a thick-bodied man with short black hair standing on end. Nobody would have suspected his artificial eye, which he had made some curious uses of in his work. He had a carefully cultivated slovenliness.

"This Hedges," said Collingwood impressively, "is a dastardly scoundrel. He threatens not merely the foundations of our government and the fabric of our society, but our very existence."

"Yeah," said Mendez de Witt.

"He must be stopped. Our glorious land cannot tolerate such a viper."

"Yeah."

"You have been selected for this—" Collingwood's phone rang, and he listened to Bloss. Bloss told him that under no circumstances must R. F. R. Hedges be assaulted, assassinated, kidnaped, or otherwise molested.

Collingwood continued, "You have been selected for the perilous task of unmasking this sinister force. But in the accomplishment of your aim, Hedges must on no account be assaulted, assassinated, kidnaped, or otherwise molested. You understand?"

"Yeah," said de Witt. "What do you want me to do, stick out my tongue at him?"

"Hah! You're as funny as a wheel-chair, de Witt. No, you will first go to work in the Bureau of Standards, where you can keep an eye on him. You will learn whence he derives his time-traveling power, and whether he can be deprived of it without much risk."

"That all?"

"That's all. Good luck, my boy."

"Some day," said de Witt, "a guy is gonna call another guy 'my boy' once too often. Be seein' ya."

Mendez S. D. de Witt had several artificial eyes, none of which was quite what it seemed. He occupied a section of laboratory desk in the B. of S. building, and, with soldering-iron and tweezers, deftly assembled the mechanism for yet another spurious optic. This one was to be a paralyzing-ray machine. The mechanism would be installed in the methyl-metha-crylate shell at another time; he didn't want the other Bureau of Standards technicians to learn about his eyes.

One of these technicians sneezed. He ran a finger around the base of his faucet and held it up with a faint smudge of yellow powder on it. He crumbled this trace of powder over his burner, and sniffed.

"Now who," he said, "has been scattering powdered sulphur around the lab?"

De Witt could have told him. He could also have told him that the sulphur was radioactive.

Russell F. R. Hedges marched through the laboratory on the way to his office. He nodded and smiled at the technicians, saying, "Ah, my dear Hutchison. Ah, my dear Jones."

When he passed de Witt, giving his laboratory's most recent recruit a look of suspicion, de Witt stared at Hedges' wrist. He shut his good eye—the right one—tight, then blinked it several times. Then he went back to his artificial eye.

When he got home, he at once took out his fake eye. The shell unscrewed into two parts, and inside it was a neat little X-ray camera, full of exposed one millimeter film. He developed this and

printed a series of enlargements. They showed X-rays of Hedges' wrist, and of the remarkable wrist watch worn thereupon. The photographs were mere black-and-gray silhouettes, made by the emanations from the radioactive sulphur that de Witt had scattered around. Each showed the inside of the watch as a jumble of coils and cogwheels, and would have been useless by itself. But de Witt, by comparing a number of pictures taken at different angles, formed a good idea of the workings of the gadget. It was Hedges' time-travel machine, all right. On its face were number-disks—like those on the odometer of an automobile—reading years and days of the year. All Hedges had to do was set the thing forward or back.

De Witt promptly set about duplicating the machine. It took him three weeks. Collingwood got pretty impatient by the end of that time.

De Witt explained: "You see, Chief, all I wanna do is chase this guy out of his own time. Then I'll fix him so he won't do nothing."

"But, de Witt, don't you remember what His Efficiency said about not molesting?"

"Yeah, I know. But that only has to do with what I do to him now. His Efficiency couldn't kick about what I did to Hedges five hundred years ago, now, could he?"

"Hmm. Yes. I see your point. Of course I believe in following His Efficiency's orders, but in combatting a sinister force like this. . . ."

DE WITT finished his duplicate time watch. He strapped it on his wrist and spun the setter.

Nothing happened, though the dial showed 2360—five years before. The C.B.I. man cursed softly and spun the disks some more, and still some more. Nothing happened until he reached 2298. Then—*whoosh*—the room blurred into frantic motion.

De Witt found himself sitting in empty air twelve feet above the ground

of a vacant lot, to whose surface he dropped with a thump.

He picked himself up. The explanation dawned upon him. He'd gone back to a date before the boarding-house where he lived was built. Thank God he hadn't tried the stunt in a skyscraper—or on the former site of another building. He wondered what it would feel like to find yourself occupying the same bit of space as a steel I-beam. Probably there'd be a hell of an explosion.

Then he wondered why the gadget had not worked until he had gone back thirty-seven years. He was thirty-six years old—that must be it: you couldn't occupy your own stretch of time more than once. It wouldn't do to have two Mendez S.D. de Witt running around simultaneously.

To check, he reversed the direction of the control and advanced the setter slowly. Nothing happened until it registered 2365 again; then—whoosh—his boarding-house scrambled into existence, like a movie of an explosion in reverse.

Then he finished his paralyzer. It proved something of a disappointment. It worked, but only at a distance of a meter or less. And you had to aim carefully at the victim's neck vertebrae.

But he inclosed the paralyzer in its eye-shaped case, put the case in his left eye socket, and walked in on Hedges unannounced.

"Ah, my dear de Witt—" said Hedges, smiling.

"Okay, skip it. I guess you know who I am, buddy."

"A C.B.I. man? I suspected it. What do you want?"

"You're coming with me. Get me?"

"Yes?" Hedges raised his eyebrows and touched his wrist watch. He vanished.

But so did Mendez de Witt.

It was damn funny, sitting there and spinning the setter, and looking at the shadowy form of Hedges on the other side of the desk. As de Witt was only a second or two behind Hedges in his pur-

suit, he could keep him in sight. When Hedges speeded up his time travel, de Witt's strong, agile fingers spun the setter faster; when Hedges vanished for a second, de Witt quickly reversed the motion of the setter and picked up Hedges going the other way. When Hedges stopped, de Witt stopped too.

The C.B.I. man grinned at Hedges. "Gotcha, huh?"

"Not quite," said Hedge. He fished a hand grenade from his pocket, and started to pull the pin. De Witt just sat there, holding the setter. Hedges put the bomb back in his pocket.

De Witt laughed. "Thought you'd turn that thing loose and skip, huh? I can skip just as fast as you can."

Hedges went back to his time watch. Forward and backward he spun the disks. De Witt followed him. The next time Hedges stopped, there was a third man in the room; a startled-looking old man.

Hedges looked at him and jerked a thumb. "One of my predecessors. I recognize his picture."

"You damn fool," said de Witt. "If he'd been sitting in that chair too it'd have been blooey for both of you."

"I suppose so, de Witt. It's a bit crowded here, don't you think?" And he began spinning the setter again.

This time de Witt lost him. He went back to the time he'd been at when he last saw Hedges, and went over it carefully. At last he picked up a glimpse of Hedges bouncing out of his chair and running for the door. De Witt adjusted the setter carefully, and managed to stop just as Hedges reached the door.

De Witt ran after him. He had to keep him in sight, not only in the three spacial dimensions, but in time also. Although he was a better runner than Hedges, as he caught up with his victim, Hedges twirled the dial on his wrist and began to fade.

DE WITT did the almost impossible feat of running after Hedges and spinning his setter at the same time.

They were outside the Bureau of Standards building. De Witt knew that if he once thoroughly lost his man, he'd never find him.

They stopped running. Hedges slowed down his setter to where de Witt could glimpse motor vehicles flashing backwards past them. Several went right through them.

"Look out!" yelled de Witt, as Hedges almost stopped his time travel at a point that intersected the space-time track of a big truck. No sound came; you could move while traveling in time, but you couldn't hear. Hedges saw his danger and speeded up again.

Hedges gave up time flight; since it had only one dimension, you could always find a man by moving back and forth along it far enough. He began running physically again, de Witt after him. They raced down Pennsylvania Avenue. De Witt stole a glance at his watch. It read 1959.

Hedges, he thought, must have had that bomb ready so that he could carry out his threat by going into the past and blowing up some innocent bystanders. De Witt, tough as he was, was shocked. He reached for his pistol, which he had hoped not to have to use.

Hedges was getting winded. He bumped into a pedestrian. De Witt felt a psychic jar run through him.

Hedges bumped another pedestrian. The pistol vanished from de Witt's grasp, and an umbrella took its place. He knew what had happened: the bumping of the pedestrian, a trivial matter in itself, was one of those first links in a chain of events that change history.

They were approaching a traffic circle. In the middle of this was a circular bit of park with an ornamental fountain. A lot of people were sitting around the fountain. De Witt grasped Hedges' intention when Hedges pulled out his bomb. If he couldn't get away, he was going to change history right there.

De Witt dodged a couple of automobiles, and with straining lungs caught up with Hedges. He hooked the umbrella

handle around Hedges' ankle. Brakes squealed and Hedges fell in front of a car. De Witt leaped on him. Again came that jarring sensation. De Witt knew that they were both changing as they struggled. People were looking at them, and the sight was entering into their histories. . . .

Hedges got the pin out of his bomb just as de Witt remembered his paralyzing eye. He blinked his real eye, and sighted the phoney eye on the back of Hedges' neck. The bomb fell into the asphalt. De Witt snatched it up and tossed it into the fountain. He screamed: "Duck!" People looked at him blankly. Then the bomb went off, sending up a fountain of water and tossing a statue of a Triton high in the air.

The jarring sensation became almost unbearable. De Witt was horrified to feel that he had grown a beard.

A couple of people were slightly cut by flying shards of concrete. But the heavy concrete rim of the fountain had stopped all the bomb fragments.

A police car appeared. De Witt became aware, in that second, of many things he hadn't had time to notice—the ancient appearance of the motorcars; the colorful costumes of the people—colorful, that is, in comparison with the grim-black-and-white of his own time.

Hedges lay on the asphalt looking blankly up at him. De Witt stooped down, took the setter of Hedges' time watch between the fingers of his left hand, and grasped the setter of his own watch with his right fingers. He gave both setters a twist.

They were still in the traffic circle. But it was early morning, and almost nobody was in sight. The fountain supported another Triton, very new-looking. De Witt had tried to send them ahead one year, and had succeeded.

THE EFFECT of the paralysis wore off Hedges; he crawled over to the curb around the fountain and sat on it with his head in his hands.

De Witt looked at him sharply. "Say,"

he said, "you aren't the same guy."

"You aren't either."

There was little doubt of that; de Witt was six inches taller than he had been, and he still had the horrible beard. His hair was disgustingly long. Mixed up with his memory of his career as a C.B.I. man came another memory, of an easy-going life on a microscopic income, devoted to disreputable friends and the writing of quantities of stickily sentimental poetry.

"I don't know why I did it," said Hedges. "I'm not ambitious. All I want is a quiet place in the country."

"That's because you aren't the same man," said de Witt. "I'm not either. I'm a damned poet." He looked at the flower-bed around the fountain, and began to compose:

The buttercup looks at the yellow rose,
And loves, as I love thee, who knows?
But the bee won't fly to both at once,
And the buttercup's love—"

"What rhymes with 'once'?"

"Dunce," said Hedges. "Are you going to do that all the time?"

"Probably."

"It's awful. But aren't you going to arrest me or something?"

"N-no. I'm not a policeman any more." He ran his hand through his long hair. "I think I'll just stay here and be a poet."

Hedges sighed. "The best-laid schemes of mice and men—in changing the history leading up to our time, we of course changed our own history and background. I think I'd like this time too. I brought quite a wad of money along; it ought to be good. I'll buy a little place in the country and raise flowers, and you can come and write poetry about them."

"Russell!"

"Mendez!" Friends for life, they shook hands. . . .

The soundless, motionless earthquake brought Co-ordinator Bloss and Vincent M. S. Collingwood to their feet. They stared at each in terror until the disturbance subsided.

"You've changed," said Bloss.

"So have you, Your Efficiency."

"Not very much though."

"No, thank God. I imagine Hedges has done all the damage he can. What's this?" On the Chief Executive's desk appeared two time watches, and a pencilled note. The note read:

To His Efficiency, the Co-ordinator of North America, or to Vincent M. S. Collingwood, Director of the C. B. I.:

We've decided to stay here, in 1960. We will try not to disturb the space-time structures any more than is necessary for the rest of our lives. The time watches we are sending back to you, as a means of transporting this note. Destroy them utterly.

If you want to see how I made out, look up a late 20th-century poet of my name.

Regards,

Mendez S. D. de Witt

Bloss pulled out the volume DAM to EDU of the encyclopedia. "Here he is," announced. "Yes, he was quite a well-known poet. Married in 1964, no children. Died in 1980. It even mentions his friend Hedges. I bet that story wasn't in the encyclopedia last week. What did you do with those watches?"

Collingwood was staring pop-eyed at the blank desk. "Nothing—they up and disappeared."

"Not at all," said the co-ordinator. "Hedges and de Witt disturbed the history between their time and ours to the point where Hedges never did any time-travel backwards in our time. So those time watches never existed."

"Let's see. The watches never existed, but they were on the desk a minute ago—but they took Hedges back so he could make it impossible for him to have done the thing he did to enable him to go back to make it impossible for him to go back—"

Bloss got out a bottle and a couple of glasses. "My dear Collingwood," he said, "don't drive yourself crazy trying to resolve the paradoxes of time travel. The watches are gone, and I for one say it's a good thing. Have a drink."

Collingwood snatched up his glass. "Now, Your Efficiency, you're talking sense!"

It wasn't strictly kid stuff when the tough Marine

sergeant swapped places with a demon in diapers. . . .

BABY FACE

a novelet by

HENRY KUTTNER



I

ANY wise mutt calling me Baby Face is going to get a sock in the puss that'll land him in 4F.

The name's Jerry Cassidy, sergeant, U. S. Marines. I tip the scale at two hundred even, and I look a lot more like Wallace Beery than Baby Sandy. I do now, anyway.

There was a time, though, when this didn't hold true.

But if any lug feels like bringing that up, he'd better have knuckle-dusters handy. If Doc McKenney wasn't such a nice old man, I'd break his neck for land-

ing me in that jam. Transference of egos, bah!

The way it happened sounds strange.

I am a big, good-natured looking feller, so I suppose the Captain's wife figured it'd be safe to leave "Stinky" Dawson with me. I ran into Mrs. Dawson on Park, as I was coming out of Grand Central. She's a cute little trick, blonde and sort of muzzy around the eyes—the look that starts you floating. Anyhow she was wheeling this baby carriage along when she saw me and said hello.

"Hi, Mrs. Dawson. Hope you're well."



He leaned forward and said, "I gotta see your draft card"

"Well enough to go dancing with the Captain tonight," she told me, laughing under her breath. "It's wonderful to have him home again. You're on leave, too, aren't you, Jerry?"

"I can prove it," I said. "I got my pass. And I'm sort of going dancing to-night too, down at the Rainbow. My—uh—girl friend says I'll learn how if I keep at it long enough."

Mrs. Dawson looked at my feet in a kind of dubious fashion.

"Uh-huh," she said. "How do you like New York?"

"I dunno. It isn't much like New Guinea. Billie's working till five, so I'm sort of killing time till then."

"There's not much to do on Park Avenue."

"Right," I said. "Only I know a saw-bones who lives around here. Doc McKenney. He used to live in Keokuk where I come from, and I thought maybe I'd look him up."

Mrs. Dawson was biting her lip. "Jerry," she said, "I wonder if you'd do me an awfully big favor."

I said sure I would, and what was it.

"Mind Stinky for half an hour. Would you do that? I hate to ask you, but it's the maid's day out and I had nobody to leave him with, and I simply must get another dress for tonight. I—I haven't seen the Captain for so long, and—well, you know."

"You bet I'll mind the little—uh—the little fella," I told her. "You run along and take your time, Mrs. Dawson."

"Thanks so much! I won't be long. And—look! I know! I'll bring you something to take to Billie. There's some lovely lingerie I saw last week at the store."

I got kind of red around the collar. "Lingerie?"

"Don't be silly, Jerry! She'll love it. Now you wait here, and if you get tired, go in that drug-store and have a coke or something. Okay?"

"Yes'm," I said, and she went off. My hands felt too big. I looked at them, and they were blushing too. Lingerie! I didn't think Billie would like it. Still, I could have been wrong. Women go for funny things.

I took a gander at the little squirt in the carriage. He was a fat, stupid-looking infant, slightly cock-eyed, and with great big cheeks that bloomed down on his shoulders. He had hands like starfish—stubby fingers sticking out in all directions—and he was trying to put his shoe in his mouth, doing a pretty good job of it. If he took after his old man, I figured he'd have a devil of a temper. So I didn't argue with him about the foot. I smoked a cigarette and looked at things.

PRETTY soon Stinky started to belch. He was lying flat on his back, waving his arms and legs around, with his eyes all squinched up. His face had turned red. His voice reminded me of the Captain's at certain times, like once when I'd got a little tight in Sydney and had a mild argument with some sailors.

Figuring he wanted his foot back, I shoved it into position, but he'd had enough of that. He turned purple and

kept hollering. People were beginning to look at me. I got scared and had a mind to beat it. But I couldn't leave the kid alone.

I went into the drug-store and asked the prescription clerk what to do. He didn't know. All babies yelled, according to him, and it was good for them.

Not this baby! All of a sudden I noticed that one of his shoes was missing.

"Oh, gosh," I said, feeling sick. "The blamed little ostrich must have ate it!"

I picked him up by the feet and shook him tentative, without much result, except he roared louder than ever. A crowd was gathering, but not a WAAC, WAVE or SPAR among them, I dithered. I kept wondering what would happen when Mrs. Dawson came back and found Stinky had strangled to death on his shoe. Court martial, anyhow. I could stand that, but—I was worried about the poor little tyke.

Then I remembered Doc McKenney. His office was only a block away, so I sent the carriage scooting like a fast jeep up Park, leaving a trail of sweat from my forehead. All the while Stinky yelled, squalled, bawled and tooted. He was sounding off, all right.

A sailor grinned at me.

"A walkie-talkie, huh?" he said, but I had no time to sock him. I yanked Stinky out of his carriage, ran up a flight of steps, and bounced through a door labeled Doc McKenney. A nurse looked up at me, startled.

"Quick!" I said. "Get the Doc. The small fry just ate his shoe!"

"But—but—"

A door across the room opened, and I saw the Doc's familiar, wrinkled old face, with his gray hair sticking up like a cock's comb. He was ushering somebody out, but fast.

"No!" Doc was yelling. "I'm not interested. I'm not satisfied with your credentials, and I'm getting in touch with the F.B.I. immediately. Get out!"

The man, a big husky with sleepy eyes and a bristling mustache, opened his mouth to say something, and then closed

it like a trap snapping shut. He was mad, I could see that. But he didn't do anything about it. He whirled and went out, with a furious glance in my direction.

"Doc!" I said.

"What? Who—well, for Pete's sake! Jerry Cassidy. Who made you a sergeant?"

I passed the baby to him. "This is life

The Light Fantastic

SO FAR as we know, Henry Kuttner has produced no new science fiction since *WELL OF THE WORLDS* (STARTLING STORIES, March 1952). Since science fiction without Kuttner is unthinkable, it is fortunate indeed that FSM is able to dig down and bring up some choice specimens from the rich supply he produced during the halcyon years of his full-time writing. Kuttner wrote in many moods and it was a measure of his talent that he was good in all of them. *BABY FACE* trips the light fantastic—and if that isn't a deserving pun we retire to the back pages.

—The Editor

and death. The kid ate a shoe or something. He's strangling!"

"Eh? A shoe?"

I explained. Doc nodded at the nurse and took me into his office, a fairly big room with lots of equipment. He went to work on the baby, while I watched, scared stiff.

After a while, Doc shrugged. "I can't find anything wrong."

"But he's yelling. He ate a shoe, I tell you."

THE nurse came in, with the missing shoe. "I found this in the carriage downstairs," she said. "Need help, Doctor?"

"No, thanks," the Doc said. He put the shoe back on Stinky's foot, but that didn't solve the problem. The nurse went out. The kid kept on crying.

"He doesn't look like you," the Doc murmured absently. "Well, he'll cry himself out pretty soon. What have you been doing?"

"Course, he doesn't look like me. He's my Captain's wife—I mean his baby's Captain—oh, gosh, Doc! Do something!"

"What?"

"What's he crying for?"

"That," Doc McKenney said thoughtfully, "is one of the greatest mysteries of the ages. No one knows why babies cry. At least, why they cry when they haven't got colic, aren't being stuck by pins, or don't require changing."

"Is it—those?" I gulped.

"Well, it might be colic," he said. "Not the others. I checked up."

"I wish the little sprat could talk," I moaned. "This is awful."

The Doc perked up. "Well, I'll be—I forgot. Here, Jerry, I'll have this fixed up in a second or two. The first practical use for my Thought-Matrix Transfer. Here." He unlocked a safe, dragged out a couple of soft helmets that looked like leather, and gave me one. It had wires woven into it, though it was flexible, and there was a tiny switch over one ear.

"You mean gag the kid?" I said. "We can't do that. Besides, a handkerchief would work better."

"Shut up," the Doc growled. "I'm a humanitarian, or I wouldn't have invented the Transfer helmets. It simply changes your mind."

"I can do that by myself," I pointed out.

Doc jammed one of the helmets over my head and donned the other himself. "I'll show you," he said. "Push the switch over." I did. My head began to feel hot. There was a low humming.

Doc moved his own switch. Everything blurred for a second. Then I felt slightly giddy. The room had sort of

swung around the other way.

"Doc" I said. "You've changed!" My voice sounded peculiar. Cracked and squeaky.

Doc McKenney had changed, all right. He was a big, husky guy, with a map like a punch-drunk gorilla. . . .

I recognized that map. I saw it every morning when I shaved. Doc looked like me!

He grinned, flipped the switch, and came toward me to turn off the one on my helmet. "Take it easy," he rumbled. "We've simply changed bodies, so to speak—though not actually. It's in the nature of a remote control. The essential psyche is not affected by the change, but the thought-matrix is, the basic pattern that makes up the conscious you."

"Doc!" I said. "Help!"

I had a headache, and was scared. The Doc chuckled. "All right, we'll change back. Flip your switch over again. That's it. Now—"

The room swirled. I was looking at Doc McKenney. I was back in my own body. Automatically I flipped the switch, as the Doc did, and then collapsed in a chair.

"Wow!" I said. "Magic!"

"Nothing of the sort. I've simply invented a perfect method of diagnosis. All the physician has to do is change his mind with that of the patient and he instantly feels all the aches, pains and symptoms of the patient. The layman can't describe with complete accuracy how he feels when he's sick. But the doctor—putting himself completely in the place of the patient—can."

"I got a headache."

The Doc looked interested. "Have you?"

I thought. "No. Funny. It's gone now."

"Ah! I've had a headache all day. Naturally you experienced it while in my body."

"It's crazy," I said.

"Not a bit. The human brain emits patterns of energy. Those patterns have

a basic matrix. Ever heard of remote control?"

"Sure. What of it?" I was interested.

DOC MCKENNEY scratched his high forehead thoughtfully. "Transplantation of the actual brain is a surgical impossibility. But the mind itself, the key matrix, can be transferred. It has certain definite vibratory periods, and my helmets, working on the inductive principle of the diatherm, effect the necessary change. You see?"

"Yeah," I said. "I don't want to hear any more about it. Stinky's still crying, and if you can't help me, what'll I do?"

"I am helping you," Doc said. "This is it. I hadn't thought of this application, but it's beautifully logical. Babies can't explain what's wrong with them, because they can't talk, but you can. I'll show you." He took the helmet off his own head and slipped it gently on Stinky's, moving the switch as he did so. Before I knew what was happening, Doc had whirled on me and reached out and—and—

"Globwobble!" I said.

Something was wrong with my eyes. Things swam mistily. There was a big round blob above me—

And somebody was roaring like an organ gone crazy. With a frantic effort I uncrossed my eyes. It was Doc McKenney's face hanging over me. I felt his fingers fumbling at my head. There was a click.

The bellowing in the background kept up. My throat and palate felt soft, blobby, and peculiar. My tongue kept crawling back into my gullet. I reached out, and a fat, starfish-like pink object shot up. My hand!

My stars!

"Bloggoble wog wog Doc whabble gob quop!" I said, in a remarkably infantile voice.

"Okay, Jerry," the Doc said. "You're in Stinky's body, that's all. He's in yours. I'll switch you back as soon as you tell me how you feel."

This time I made more sense. I lisped a lot, though.

"Gemme ouda this! Quick!"

I hauled myself erect somehow. To a squatted position, that is. My legs were curled up and seemed helpless.

"I feel all right," I managed to say. "Except I want back."

"No pains?"

"No. No!"

"Then it was merely temper," Doc said. "The emotions are transferred with the mind, but the sensory equipment stays with the body. The baby was just irritable. He's still crying."

I looked. My body, the body of Sergeant Jerry Cassidy, was lying on its back on the floor, arms and legs curled up, its eyes were tight shut, and its mouth open as it bawled. Great tears splashed down its—my—cheeks.

My mouth felt like I was eating mush, but I managed to tell him I wanted my own body back. My feeling was strengthened by the fact that Stinky was sucking my thumb, lying there on his back and drowsily staring up at the ceiling. At any rate, he'd stopped bawling. As I looked, his eyes closed and he started to snore.

"Well," Doc said. "He's gone to sleep. Maybe the mental transference has a soothing effect."

"Not on me it hasn't," I snarled feebly, in a quavering soprano. "I don't like this. Get me out!"

II

BEFORE the Doc could transfer me back into my own body, there was a scuffling in the outer office, and the nurse squeaked briefly. I heard a thump. The door slammed open, and three tough mugs came in, holding guns in their fists—a Webley and two small, flat automatics. The man with the Webley was the same lug Doc McKenney had been throwing out when I arrived. The lug's mustache was still bristling over the rat-trap mouth, and his eyes looked sleepier

than ever. The other two were just gorillas.

"Smith!" Doc said. "Why, you filthy Nazi!" He dived for a scalpel, but Smith was too fast. The Webley's barrel thunked against Doc's temple, and the old man went down, cussing a blue streak till Smith hit him again.

"Gut!" one of the other thugs said. I hopped up from the operating table where I'd been squatting and lunged toward Smith, throwing a fast hay-maker at his jaw. Unfortunately, my legs crumpled up, and I fell flat on my face, giving myself a nasty wallop on the nose.

"Who's that?" somebody said. I rolled over. The gunman with the squirt was pointing—with his gun—toward my own body, curled up on the carpet and snoring.

Smith held up a warning hand. "Patient, I guess. Under ether, by the way he snores."

"He's got that helmet on."

"Ja, ja," Smith jerked it off. "The herrenvolken need this. And—" he removed my helmet—"this, too. Number Three will be pleased. This way, we have to pay nothing for the device."

"Would we have paid anyway, Herr Schmidt?"

"Nein," said Herr Schmidt. "Do not be more stupid than you can help. By posing as a government official—ha! We waste time. *Raus!* I will meet you tonight—you know where."

"Ja, the circus," said the man with the squirt.

"Sh-h!"

"Who is there to hear? The baby? *Unsinn.*"

"No precaution is nonsense," Smith said. He was stuffing the two helmets in a small black satchel Doc had there on a glass case of instruments. "Hurry!"

They went out. I sat blankly on the operating table, sort of stunned. "Doc," I yelled.

No answer.

The floor looked a dickens of a ways

down. But I knew I had to get off the table, somehow. I crawled around, cursing squeakily, till I discovered that I had a plenty strong grip for my size. My legs were pretty feeble, but my arms were okay.

I let myself down over the edge, hung on, dangling, and then dropped. It didn't hurt. I was so fat I bounced. When I picked myself up, the room seemed to have got bigger. Table, chairs—everything loomed way above me. Doc was lying motionless in a corner. I crawled over to him.

He was breathing. That was something, anyway. But I couldn't revive him. Concussion, I guessed. Hm-m.

My own body was still asleep. I shook its head till it woke up.

"Listen, kid," I said thickly. "Try to understand. We gotta get help. Can you hear me?"

I'd forgotten how young the baby was. He grabbed me by the seat of the diapers and started to drag me around like a puppy, going goo-goo in a sickening bass voice. I called him dirty names, and he finally let go and tried to eat his foot again. My foot!

I thought of the nurse, but when I crawled into the outer office, she was flattened over her desk, colder than a codfish. The sight of the phone gave me an idea. I couldn't reach it till I yanked on the cord. Then it thumped down, missing me by an inch.

I had trouble dialing; my fingers kept folding up. Finally I got a good grip on a pencil that had fallen off with the phone, and that helped. The operator asked me what I wanted.

"Goblobble—uh—police! Police headquarters." It was an awful strain to force the soft tissues of my throat and tongue into talking position. I kept relapsing into mushy gargles.

"Desk Sergeant. Yes?"

I TOLD him what I wanted—not much, just that there'd been a hi-jacking at the Doc's. He interrupted.

"Who is this talking?"

"Sergeant Cassidy, U. S. Marines."

"The devil you say!" He gave an offensive imitation of my voice, which was naturally squeaky. "Thargeant Cathidy, U. Eeth Marinth. What is this, a gag?"

"No!" I squealed. "Blast it! Thend up a thquad."

"A thquad?"

I started to tell him about the Nazi lugs who'd stolen Doc's invention, but I had sense enough to shut up before I put my foot in it completely. I could feel the officer freezing. But he finally said he'd send a man around, and I had to be satisfied with that.

So I hung up and looked at my toes. I was thinking hard. I doubted if even Doc could convince anybody he'd invented a Transfer helmet. They'd classify him as a screwpot and toss him in the observation ward. And he was a scientist. I wasn't even a Marine, technically speaking. They don't have baby Marines.

Those helmets were valuable. I didn't know what Smith wanted with them, but I gathered that Germany might find 'em handy, somehow.

Then I had it. Spies! Holy jumping catfish!

A German mind inside the skull of an Allied brass hat—what a sweet method for espionage. Even fingerprinting wouldn't show the truth. The Nazis could filter in trained spies to key positions, and—and—win the war!

Whew!

But—hång it!—nobody would believe me. Doc might be able to convince 'em, with facts and figures, only I didn't know when he'd wake up. Meantime, Smith was going to turn the helmets over to Number Three, whoever that was. At the—yeah—at the circus.

I had my own troubles to worry about, too. Here I was, in Stinky's body. What would happen if I couldn't get the helmets back? I'd have to spend the rest of my life as a baby—until I grew up

anyway. Somehow, I didn't like the idea of telling Captain Dawson what had happened.

Stinky, in my body, was gurgling and cooing in the other office, and I decided I'd better move, but fast. I tried my legs. They had a tendency to buckle, but I managed pretty well. I knew the trick of walking, I guess, and Stinky didn't. The muscles weren't too weak. They hadn't been trained, that was all.

The outer door was shut, and I couldn't reach the knob.

It didn't take long to push a light chair when I needed it, and then I climbed up like a monkey till I could turn the knob. That was enough. Outside, the stairs gave me some trouble, though I got down by crawling backwards, feeling awfully unprotected from the rear. Finally I was in the vestibule, looking up at the big door there and knowing I couldn't make it. There weren't any chairs down here.

I saw a shadow cross the pane, and the door swung open. It was a cop. He headed up the stairs without seeing me—he was looking up, not down—and I scrambled to get outside before the door shut. I was lucky. It was one of those pneumatic things. But I almost lost my diaper as I squeezed through.

So there I was on Park, not liking it at all. The people were too big. A few of them glanced at me as they passed, and I figured I'd better start moving. I fell down a couple of times, but that was nothing, except when a hatchet-faced dame with a voice like vinegar started to pick me up, saying something about a poor lost baby. What I told that lady made her drop me like a hot brick.

"Oh, my gracious!" she yelped. "Such language!"

She kept following me, though, and I knew I had to lose her somehow. It was the first time I'd ever been trailed by a cookie, even if she was overbaked. I saw a bar coming up, and realized I was thirsty. Anyway, I needed a drink. After what I'd been through, anybody would.

If I could sit down with a beer or something and think things over, it might help.

TURNING into the place, I managed the swinging door okay and went in, leaving beagle-puss outside, clucking like she'd gone crazy. It was a darkish, quiet sort of bar, with not many customers, and I climbed up a bar-stool without attracting attention. My eyes just came over the level of the mahogany.

"Rye," I said.

The bartender, a fat old guy in a white apron, looked around. He didn't see me.

"Rye!" I said again. "Beer chaser."

This time he saw me. His eyes bugged out. He came and leaned on the bar, staring at me. Finally he grinned.

"Well, look at the sprout," he chuckled. "Did I hear you ask for rye?"

"Listen, you big lug," I snarled. "You want me to pin your ears back?"

"What with?" he asked. "Safety pins? Haw-haw!" He thought it was funny.

"Shut up and gimme a shot," I growled squeakily, and he found a bottle and a glass. I licked my lips. Then, just before he poured, he drew back and looked at me solemnly.

"I gotta see your draft card, old man," he said. "Haw-haw-haw!"

If I could have managed the words that came to my lips, he'd have known for certain I wasn't an innocent babe. But my palate, as usual, turned into mush.

"Glab-bab-da-da," I said, or words to the effect.

A dignified old buzzard with a gleaming watch-chain strung across his vest came over and picked me up.

"A fine thing," he boomed. "Mothers bringing their children into bars—and children this young!" He looked around searchingly, but nobody claimed me. A honey in a blue dress, sipping a cuba libre in a booth, said I wasn't hers, the darling, and could she hold me? All of a sudden an idea hit me. Billie! If I could get in touch with her.

Uh-uh. But I didn't like to have her see me like this.

I felt sick. Still it looked like the only way. The trouble was, I had no way of reaching her.

The old buzzard was getting ready to hand me over to the honey. It went against the grain, but I squalled and clung to the watch-chain, keeping it up till I put the idea across. "I guess he likes you," the honey said. "Well, you keep him. His mother ought to show up pretty soon."

"Yes. Yes. Another Scotch, Tony. There." He sat down in a booth, keeping me in his lap. I toyed thoughtfully with the watch-chain. He tickled me under the chin, and I managed to keep from calling him a dirty name.

"Poor baby, then. Is it a poor baby?"

Well, I was. Broke as the devil. Stony. I needed dough!

After I'd finished with the watch-chain, I delved into the buzzard's vest pockets. As I'd hoped, there was a coin or two loose there. I dug out some change, but the lug tried to take it away from me. We had a sort of tussle, and the dough spilled out of my hand, tinkling over the floor.

"Ah, ah, naughty!" said Moneybags, and set me down carefully on the seat. He and the bartender started to pick up the coins.

I swung myself down, snaffled a coin, and waddled unsteadily toward the back, where I'd seen a phone booth. Moneybags started after me, but I saw him coming. I headed for the honey in the blue dress, holding out my arms.

She picked me up. It wasn't hard to take. I kept pointing back toward the booth.

"What is it, baby? What a nice little fellow! Kiss, then?"

I complied, and she jumped and looked sort of startled. Oh, well. I kept pointing, and after a while she got the idea. Moneybags came along and stood grinning, obviously on the make, but she wasn't having any of the old goat.

"He seems to like you, miss."

"Yes," she said vaguely. "He wants something."

"Phone," I said, not daring to make it clearer.

"Oh, he can talk! He knows a few words, doesn't he?" she smiled at me. "You darling! But you can't use the phone. You're not old enough."

"Mm-m," I said. "Kiss."

AT THIS the honey blinked. She got up rather fast and took me to the phone booth, holding me up to the mouthpiece. I tried to wriggle free, and managed to get my feet on the seat. Then I waved my arms at her and yelled, "Go 'way."

She stepped back, startled, letting me go, and I tried to close the folding door. Moneybags was hovering in the background, only too anxious to help, and he shut it for me.

"Oh, but—he'll hurt himself in there."

She was too late. I'd got the receiver down, slipped a nickel in the slot, and was frantically dialing, having a dickens of a time with my folding fingers. I could see Moneybags and the honey staring at me, so I kept my voice as low as possible when I finally got through to Billie.

"Look, Billie, this is Jerry—"

"Jerry who?"

"Cassidy!" I said. "You know me—we got a date tonight."

"I have with Jerry Cassidy. But I know Jerry's voice. Sorry, but I'm busy right now."

"Wait! I—uh—got some throat trouble. This is me, honest. I'm in a jam."

"As usual. I—you're not hurt, are you?"

"Not exactly, but I need help, plenty bad. It's life and death, hon!"

"Oh, Jerry! Of course I'll help. Where are you?"

I gave her the address of the bar. "Get down here as fast as you can. You'll find me—I mean you'll find a baby here. Pick him up and call a taxi. And don't be surprised by anything you hear."

"But where are you? What's this about a baby?"

"Tell you later. Rush right down."

Moneybags opened the door. I hung up and slammed a right hook on his jaw. The lug thought I was playing or something.

"Isn't he clever? Pretending to use the phone like that. I think this calls for a drink, miss."

"Well, all right." She picked me up, and I let her, not knowing what else to do. So I sat in her lap while Moneybags fed her drinks, and every time the old boy tried to make a date, I yelled. After a while he took a dislike to me. Do you wonder?

III

YES, I think Moneybags was getting ready to strangle me when Billie arrived, at last. She's a trim, pert little trick with long, glossy dark curls and an oval face and everything that goes with it. The minute I saw her come in, I bounced like mad, waved my arms, and yelled.

Billie looked surprised, but she didn't ask any questions. Moneybags watched her come toward us.

"Is this your child, madam?" he asked.

"Maa-maa!" I bawled, when Billie hesitated. I could see she was wondering what this was all about. My throat got dry. I couldn't swallow till Billie finally nodded and grabbed me. She stared around, searching, I knew, for me, but Sergeant Cassidy was wearing mufti just then—if you can call knitted wraps and stuff mufti.

I didn't dare say anything, but I hoped Billie would remember what I'd told her on the phone. She did. She took me out and called a taxi.

"Where to, miss?"

"The Garden!" I piped.

He didn't notice who was talking. Billie did, though, and she stared at me with her eyes getting bigger and bigger.

"Relax, hon," I said. "Keep a grip on yourself. Something awful's happened."

"Uh-huh," she said, whispering. "It sure has. I'm crazy. Oo-oh!"

She got white and shut her eyes. I had a nasty moment when I thought she was fainting. How the devil could a baby administer first aid in a taxi?

"Billie!" I squeaked. "Blog-wob-blob . . . wake up! It's me! Jerry! Don't pass out on me."

"B-but—" She started to giggle hysterically, and I knew she was okay. "Oh, my goodness! You're a midget, of course, pretending to be Jerry."

I tilted back my head and stared up at her face, way up there. My eyes kept slipping out of focus, as usual. I felt mad, sick, hopeless. Shucks, you've been a baby yourself. You know how it feels. With me it was worse.

"Billie, I want you to listen and try to understand," I said. "I'll lay it flat on the line. It's daffy, but you gotta believe me."

Billie sighed. She was pale around the ears.

"Shoot," she said, "I'll try, anyhow."

So I told her what had happened. All the while I kept wondering how to get out of this mess. If Billie couldn't help—well, I didn't know anybody else who could, except the Doc, and he was a non-combatant just at present. I'd already tried the cops. I knew how the desk sergeant must have felt. If a stupid-looking baby had slung such a spiel at me a few days ago, I'd have laughed it off—if that. But in my spot, what else was there to do?

It was awful. Jerry Cassidy had always been able to take care of himself. A man who weighs two hundred stripped, and no fat, is apt to get pretty cocky. Besides, I knew a few little tricks—some Jap wrestling angles, and some Apache footwork. A lot of good that did me now. I couldn't even pull the trigger on a light automatic, probably.

What good is a baby, anyway?

That got me started thinking of Mrs. Dawson and the Captain. Stinky was a lot of good to them, anyhow. By this time Mrs. Dawson must have come back

from her shopping and found me gone. Oh-oh!

Also I was dead tired, for some reason. My muscles felt like soft boiled eggs. I never felt so sleepy, that I could remember.

I managed to finish telling Billie what had happened, but then I must have fallen asleep in her lap. When I woke up, we were in a drug-store booth, and she was shaking me.

"Wake up, Jerry! Wake up!"

"Da da da," I mumbled. "Waaa . . . oh . . . Wh-wha—"

"You dozed off," Billie told me. "Babies need a lot of sleep."

"Lay off that baby stuff! I—say, you called me Jerry! So you do believe me, huh?"

Billie frowned. "Yes. How do you feel now?"

Okay. Well, thirsty. I want a drink. "What?"

"Beer," I said.

"What you'll get is milk."

I MADE strangling noises. "Milk! Billie, for Pete's sake! I may look like a sprat, but I'm still Jerry Cassidy."

"Milk," she said firmly. "I'll get you a nursing bottle."

But I drew the line at that. Billie compromised by getting me a glass of milk, and I had some trouble managing it, slurping the blasted stuff all over my front. Finally we figured out the best way for me to drink—I used straws.

It wasn't beer, but it helped. I was plenty thirsty. I sucked away, and Billie told me what had happened.

"I phoned headquarters, Jerry. I told 'em I was looking for you."

"Uh? Oh. Bwob—I mean, what happened?"

"Doctor McKenney's still unconscious. So's his nurse. They're in emergency. It's nothing serious, though. And—" She hesitated.

"Go on."

Billie gulped. "They said they had a Sergeant Cassidy there, all right, but he was either drunk or nuts. All he would

do was crawl around on the floor, play with his toes, and cry. They—they said it was an open and shut case. He—you—Jerry, must have gone out of his head and slugged the doctor and his nurse."

"Out of his head is right," I said weakly. "Right into this dopey little noggin." I slammed a fat fist against my skull.

"Gee," Billie said. "I wonder if you looked like this when you were a baby. You must have been awfully cute."

"Lay off that," I howled. "We got work to do."

"I don't know what we can do, Jerry. When the doctor wakes up, maybe he'll think of something."

"What about those Nazis?" I asked. "Smith and Number Three and the others?"

"I don't see what we can do."

"Look," I said. "They're going to the circus at the Garden. It's a swell place to meet, in a crowd. Smith's got the Transfer helmets in that satchel, and I bet he'll try to slip it to Number Three."

Billie nodded. I went on.

"You take me to the circus, see? We'll wander around. I can spot Smith and the two lugs he had with him. When I do that, you call a cop. Make up some yarn—anything. Get the cop to arrest Smith, or—well, the trick is to get that satchel. After that, it's in the bag."

"Maybe I could grab it."

"Uh-uh. Those Nazis have guns. I don't want you to take chances. You do what I tell you, and play safe. Blast it!" I said. "I wish I could get my hands on an automatic, or a Mills." I thought that over and chuckled. "They don't hang babies in this state, do they?"

"Don't talk like that, Jerry!"

"Well, where are we?"

"On Eighth."

"Avenue? Near the Garden? Swell! Let's go."

"Without tickets?"

"Oh-oh. Got any dough?"

Billie nodded. "Yesterday was payday. Anyway, I won't have to pay for you."

"It's a loan," I said firmly. "I'm no gigolo."

"Not at your age," she agreed. "You'd look funny doing the samba with those muffin-like feet of yours."

I swallowed that, though I didn't like it. "Let's go," I said with dignity, and Billie picked me up, paid the check and carried me out. She didn't know much about holding babies, I could tell. I sort of dangled. The sidewalk looked to be a mile down.

Billie had to get a ticket from a scalper, but, anyway, we got in. The Garden's a big place.

"Any idea where Smith was to meet Number Three?"

"Nope," I said helplessly. "We better just wander around. I'm bound to spot the lug sometime—I hope."

We wandered. Anywhere there were crowds. But I didn't catch a glimpse of the Nazi with the mustache and the sleepy eyes, or his two sidekicks either. Naturally I didn't even know what Number Three looked like.

WE WENT in the freak show and looked at fire-eaters and sword-swallowers, midgets, skeletons and fat ladies. We watched lions, elephants, a couple of hippos, and a giraffe or two. We saw a big crowd at one cage and we went over there. It was a gorilla, almost as big as Gargantua or Tony Galento, squatting behind bars and glass and jamming a food-basin on his head and yanking it off again. The keeper, standing by the door, kept up a long spiel that drew the crowd like flies, but I still couldn't find Smith. Or the Doc's satchel, with the Transfer helmets in it.

I was beginning to feel sleepy again. I also felt awful. If Smith got away with this gag, it would mean—*whew!* Spies scattered all through our lines—up at the top, too! They'd be completely undetectable spies!

I had my own troubles, also. Suppose Doc died? Suppose he got amnesia? Suppose he couldn't make more of the helmets? I'd have to spend the rest of

my life with Captain Dawson as my old man! Unless he murdered me, for—for—what was it? Kidnaping? What if he broke me and put me on permanent K. P.? I could see myself, a fat, blobby-looking squirt in diapers, peeling spuds day and night—or maybe in the guard-house, loaded down with chains—uh!

One thing I know—I couldn't be Sergeant Jerry Cassidy like this. How could I handle a machine gun? As for a rifle, I wouldn't even be able to lift it.

Maybe they'd send Stinky, in my body, back on active service. Yeah! With a Jap coming at him, bayonet ready, he'd fall over on his back and start playing with his toes. Oh-oh!

Billie shook me. I was getting sleepy again, and showed it. I managed to prop my eyes open, though it was still hard to focus them.

"It's okay," I whispered. And yawned.

"Jerry, you can't take a nap now."

"I—uh—won't." But I did. I couldn't help it. Babies need lots of sleep, and I felt dead beat.

However, Billie pinched me. I woke up with a squeal, and noticed a battleship of a dame bearing down on us, a steely glint in her eye. Billie didn't see her coming till it was too late.

"What are you doing with that child?" the battleship demanded.

"Nothing," Billie said, looking confused. "I just pinched him. He keeps wanting to go to sleep."

"Pinched him! Good heavens! What sort of mother are you?"

"I'm not," Billie snapped, trying to keep me from falling out of her arms. She had me by one foot and one hand and was sort of wrapping me up in myself, like I was an octopus. "I'm not even married."

The old girl froze. "What are you doing with that baby, then?" she asked, as if it was any of her business.

Billie was getting confused. "I'm going to marry him," she said wildly. "I'm just waiting for him to grow up. Oh, go away. We're busy."

"Hmph! This seems very suspicious

to me. Have you been drinking?"

"No. I've been trying to keep this—this—" She waved me in the battleship's face—"trying to keep it from drinking, if you must know. It—he—keeps yelling for beer."

"What? You mean you give that infant beer?"

"I don't have to, usually," Billie gasped, as I nearly flipped out of her grip. "He orders it himself, when he isn't gargling rye. This lug has drunk his way around the world."

"My gracious! That poor little innocent child! I'm going to take steps to have you punished."

Just then the poor little innocent child made a few well-chosen remarks.

"You blathering old buzzard," I howled. "Beat it and stop upsetting Billie. You'll have her dropping me in a minute. If you want to help, drag yourself off and come back with a bottle of beer. I'm thirsty, drat it!"

"Ook!" said the battleship, turning green under her camouflage paint. She made a few vague gestures, clawed at the air, turned, and toddled off as fast as she could.

"See what you've done?" Billie said. "The poor woman thinks she's crazy."

"Serve her right," I growled squeakily. "Hurry up and let's find Smith before I go to sleep again. Try that show over there, where the acrobats are."

THERE were seats here, and Billie stood at the entrance, while I looked around. Suddenly I let out a muffled yipe.

"There he is! See, up by that column? The guy with the mustache?"

"Where? Oh—I see him. What—what'll I do now?"

Smith wasn't sitting with anybody. He was humped up on his seat, intently watching some gymnasts on a trapeze, and I noticed the black satchel was between his feet.

"Maybe we'd better hunt up a cop," I whispered. "Don't take any chances, Billie."

But she didn't seem to hear. Still totting me, she went up the aisle, edged across, and sat down right next to Smith. I felt my stomach go cold. The sleepy-eyed Nazi gave us a quick, side-wise look, and then turned back to staring at the show. He didn't recognize me, I figured. All babies look pretty much alike, fat and droopy.

There, not three feet away from me, was the satchel, with the Transfer helmets in it—I hoped. They were there unless Smith had already turned them over to Number Three. I guessed he hadn't done so. He'd have given Number Three the satchel, without risking attracting attention by digging out the helmets.

I looked around for Smith's two pet thugs, but I couldn't find them in the crowd. Billie didn't dare say anything to me, nor would I have dared answer her, with our enemy right beside us. I sat in Billie's lap and wondered what she was planning, and tried to make a plan or two myself. If I could sneak off with the bag.

It was an idea. I caught Billie's eye and winked, pointing down. After a minute she put me beside her, on the seat, and when Smith wasn't looking, lowered me to the floor. I ducked in under the seats, where I couldn't be seen, and felt dust choking me. I was thirsty again.

There wasn't any beer on draught where I was, so I crawled behind Billie's legs and kept going till I was behind a pair of blue serge pants. Between Smith's feet was the black bag, partly under the seat, where he'd pushed it to keep it hidden, I guess. I didn't dare touch the satchel. He'd have felt me trying to slide it away.

If I could open it, I could sneak out the helmets.

I tried that. I had an idea that Smith would look down any minute and then step on me. But I had to get those helmets. That was the first and most important angle. After that, even if Smith managed to escape, he'd have to do it

without the helmets.

The snap lock on the bag gave me a lot of trouble. My fingers were filled with mush. They kept bending back. When finally I did click the lock open, it snapped like a pistol shot. I froze, knowing that I'd be stepped on in another second or two.

But the band had been playing plenty loud, and the sound hadn't been as explosive as I'd thought. Anyway, Smith didn't glance down. After my heart came back where it belonged, I started to open the satchel, inch by inch. Not far, just enough so I could slip my arm in and feel around. When I did that, I touched the smooth fabric of one of the helmets right away.

I sneaked it out and went after the other one. As I got it, there was a thump, and another pair of pants-legs appeared. Somebody had sat down beside Smith. I saw the new guy's foot reach over and press Smith's shoe, tapping out what looked like a code.

Number Three!

IV

WHEW! I looked at those brown-tweed legs and those brown oxfords, with a long scratch across one toe, and started sweating. If Smith discovered what had happened now, it'd be curtains for Cassidy, or Stinky, or whoever I was!

But nobody made a move. Apparently neither Nazi wanted to take chances, with Billie sitting right beside them. That gave me a breather, anyhow. What next?

The problem was settled right away. I heard a squalling, familiar voice squawking. "That's the girl!" the voice said. "That's her! I'm sure she's kidnapped the baby." It was the hatchet-faced battlewagon!

She'd come back with cops. The minute I heard a deep brogue telling Billie to come along quietly, I knew the lid was off. Wow! If Billie went off, leaving me here with those two lugs, it'd be all up

with Jerry Cassidy for good!

Billie knew it too. I couldn't see much, but I heard a scuffling, heard the battlewagon cry out in pain, and heard Billie's voice raised in argument. She was talking about Nazi spies.

"Those men, officer," she insisted. "Right beside me, here. They're enemy agents. They're stealing an important invention."

"Now, now," said the cop. "Take it easy, lady."

But Smith made a mistake. He reached down for the bag, and his fumbling fingers discovered that it was open.

"Donner und—officer! This girl is a thief. She has my helmets stolen."

Number Three's foot kicked Smith's leg, and the dope shut up, but it was too late. He'd made a fatal break. New York cops are quick on the uptake.

I heard a shout, a banging noise, and the blue serge pants flipped apart. I looked right into Smith's face as he bent down and peered under the seat. He saw me, crouching there gripping the Transfer helmets. His hand shot out to grab me. I scrambled back just in time.

"Hold it, mister," the cop said. "Hey! Drop that gun, you!" I guessed he meant Number Three, for Smith was busy trying to crawl over the back of his seat and get at me. This time the banging noise wasn't feet clumping. A gun had gone off.

The cop didn't fire in that crowd. He just went for Number Three. The two of them got tangled up with Smith, and that gave me a chance to duck out into the aisle. People were getting up, startled, a whistle was shrilling, and Billie and the battlewagon were rolling down the incline, fighting like wildcats. Somebody who looked familiar was ducking out into the animal show next door. It was the thug with the squint, Smith's sidekick.

I only got a glimpse. Smith had freed himself from the tangle and was coming at me again. I dived under the seats again. I had a slight advantage in being

so small, but I was weak, too, and I had to keep hold of the helmets. Smith had his Webley out.

I dodged toward the other aisle. Just in time I looked up and saw Smith's other pal coming to meet me, with a nasty grin on his pan. I scooted away like a tadpole. A baby can crawl pretty fast, especially when he doesn't have to bother about broken-field running. Those rows of seats were slowing down my pursuers a little, and that helped.

Then the lid blew off completely. There'd been quite a rumpus anyhow, but I heard a tumult of sound that nearly deafened me. People were shouting and screaming and stamping all around.

"Gott!" the Nazi on my left yelled. "Erik has let the gorilla loose. Shoot the brat."

"Nein," Smith snapped. "This will give us a chance to get away in the excitement. But first the helmets, quick."

They came after me again. This time I reversed my route—I'd been scuttling up the ramp—and went down. It was faster. I wasn't being shot at, luckily. The Germans were afraid of putting a bullet through the helmets, I guess.

I ducked a hand that swooped down at me, slipped, and went rolling down like a ball. I couldn't stop myself. But I still kept a tight grip on the Transfer helmets. When I stopped, I was a little ways out in the arena, and it was empty. The exits were jammed with people fighting their way out.

Twenty feet away, coming toward me with his mouth wide open, was the gorilla!

I BEAT a retreat faster than Rommel ever did. Of course the seat under which I crouched wouldn't protect me at all if that big monkey took a notion to grab me, but there weren't any bomb shelters handy. I didn't know what had happened to Smith and his pal, though I could hear the cop and Number Three still fighting above me somewhere. Billie had vanished, too.

The gorilla was hesitating, getting

ready to wander off somewhere. When he did that, I knew, Smith would close in, and I'd be trapped.

Then I remembered something—seeing the gorilla, in his cage, fitting his food-basin on his bullet head. Maybe—maybe there was an out.

I clicked the switches on both the helmets, leaving them turned that way, and threw one of the gadgets at the monkey. My pitching arm wasn't so hot just then. But the gorilla saw the helmet, and it aroused his curiosity. He picked it up, blinked, and wandered away. I yelled at him. Smith was beginning to pluck up courage. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him starting to move nearer.

The gorilla turned and looked at me. I scuttled out into the arena. A glance behind me showed that Smith's pet thug had ganged up with Number Three on the cop. The officer was still fighting, but he was being pistol-whipped.

Also, circling around toward me, through the seats, was not only Smith, but the squint-eyed lug who'd let the gorilla out.

My legs were too wobbly to be useful. I was pooped out. For a baby, I'd been having a devil of a lot of exercise. If Smith rushed me now, I knew I wouldn't be able to crawl away fast enough to elude him. So I sat there, with the gorilla staring at me, and put the helmet on my head.

Then I took it off. Monkey-face opened his mouth stupidly. He'd forgotten about the helmet he was holding. Lamb-brain!

I kept jamming the helmet over my head and yanking it off again, and finally the gorilla got so interested he took a step toward me, dropping his own helmet as he did so. I saw him look down, pick up the thing, and finger it inquisitively.

"Hey!" I squealed. "Over here! Like this!"

He stared at me. I put the helmet on and, just then, a big hand clamped down on my arm. I tried to jerk free, but I

just wasn't strong enough. I had a brief glimpse of Smith's sleepy-eyed face, with its hard, rat-trap mouth, and then—

Then I wasn't there any more. I was standing in the arena looking across to where Smith was picking up a baby. My arms were lifted, fitting something on to my head.

The helmet! It wasn't my head, either. The helmet hardly came over the top of the furry crown. I took one look down, and that was enough.

I wasn't a baby any more. I was a gorilla. *Wow!*

The helmet almost fell off my head, and I caught it awkwardly, not yet used to my new body. As I wondered what to do with the thing, I saw Billie across the arena, rising from the prostrate body of the battlewagon. I yelled at her, and it came out a deep, booming roar. But she looked at me.

I tossed her the helmet. Then I went for Smith!

Guns were popping off somewhere, which didn't mean anything. The bullets went wild. Did you ever try to fire a snap shot at a bellowing gorilla charging straight at you? Okay, then.

Smith dropped the baby as I got there, and hurdled a row of seats. I caught the kid, set him down gently, and kept going. I didn't bother to jump over the seats. I just tore 'em up. I ploughed ahead toward Smith, stopping only to gather in the squint-eyed thug and pick him up in one mighty hand. He wasn't so heavy. I threw him at Smith. They went down hard. I landed on top of them, with a crash of splintered wood. They didn't bother to get up.

Somebody fired a shot at me. It was the squint-eyed Nazi. He and Number Three had finally managed to knock out the cop, though it took two of them, clubbing their guns. I couldn't see Number Three.

THE gunman thought he was out of my reach, but he'd forgotten how long a gorilla's arms are. I didn't realize

that myself till I swung hard, heard a klunk, and saw the guy go spinning off like a pinwheel. He didn't get up, either.

Billie screamed. That whirled me around in a hurry. She was halfway across the arena, running to pick up Stinky and the other helmet, running as fast as she could, and Number Three was racing after her, his gun ready. The crowds around the exits were making so much rumpus that hardly anybody noticed what was happening. But I did.

Gorillas can't go fast, except for short distances. Number Three had too good a lead. He'd catch Billie before I could catch him—unless I did something quick.

I charged down the swathe of destruction I'd made, and leaped up with all my strength. The gymnasts had fled, but their equipment was still here. One trapeze was hooked back right where I wanted it. I caught the bar, and my weight ripped it free from its hook. It carried me sailing across the arena, straight for Number Three.

He'd stopped. He was standing motionless, taking steady aim at Billie's back as she stooped to scoop up Stinky.

Then I saw I was going to miss him. The trapeze was arcing me off to the left. I let go, twisting frantically in mid-air, and went swooshing down. If I missed—Number Three wouldn't!

I gave a last desperate writhe. A gun went off, but a fraction before that, I hit. I hit with all the impact of a gorilla's tremendous bulk. Luckily, my fall was cushioned.

It was tough on Number Three, though. They couldn't even scrape him up afterward. They had to use blotting paper.

I got up and brushed myself off. Billie wasn't hurt, I saw. Anyhow, she was running again. I yelled her name. It came out in an unintelligible roar.

But she must have heard something familiar in it, for she stopped and looked over her shoulder. I couldn't talk, of course, but I made gestures. But Billie got the idea.

She knew what I wanted—one of the helmets. So she tossed it to me, though she didn't get too close. After making sure the switch was on, I fitted it on my head as well as I could. People were closing in now, keepers and so forth. There wasn't much time. I pointed insistently.

Billie put the other helmet over Stinky's head. The switch had been flipped off, but she moved it when I made pointing motions. That did it.

I wasn't a gorilla any more. I was in Billie's arms, panting with exhaustion, and feeling thirsty and sleepy as the dickens.

"Jerry!" she gasped. "Are you all right? Is this you now?"

"Yeah," I said. "Get the other helmet back after they catch the gorilla. We'll need it to—to—bwob-wob—uh—"

It was no use. I'd turned into mush. I went to sleep, right then and there. . .

When I woke up, I started to crawl automatically, but it didn't feel right, somehow. Then I knew why. I was me again.

I was lying on a couch, and Billie was sitting beside me, watching. She looked tired.

"Oh, gosh," I said. "What happened, hon?"

"Jerry!"

"Uh-huh. All of me, for a change. How come?"

"Doctor McKenney recovered—he didn't have a concussion, after all. He verified the whole business, and used the helmets while you were asleep. Stinky's a baby all through now, and you're—you're a hero. It'll be in all the papers. And the government sent somebody to arrange about the helmets with the doc-

tor. They're safe now."

She had it all mixed up, but I got the idea.

"Stinky's okay?"

"He's fine. He wasn't hurt a bit. And it wasn't your fault, Jerry, after all. You couldn't help what happened. So don't feel badly."

I looked at her. "About what?"

"Well, you did capture those enemy agents, and everything. He can't be too hard on you!"

"Who?"

"Captain Dawson," Billie said. "He's waiting outside to see you. Mrs. Dawson went home with Stinky."

I gulped. "Oh. How does he look?"

"Kind of mad," Billie admitted. "Where are you going?"

"Look, there's another door, see?" I said. "And there's a fire escape outside that window. My pass is good for another two days, and by that time Captain Dawson may decide not to court martial me. Somehow I don't think I better see him now."

"Maybe you're right. But I'm coming with you."

"Swell," I said. "What I need is a beer. Let's go!"

We went.

I didn't see the Captain till my pass was up. I guess he'd cooled off a little. But—uh—not much. Besides, he couldn't have meant all the things he said. I don't know where he ever picked up such language. Oh, well. I got one consolation. I'm a hero, even if I am on extra duty, bossing a fatigue detail.

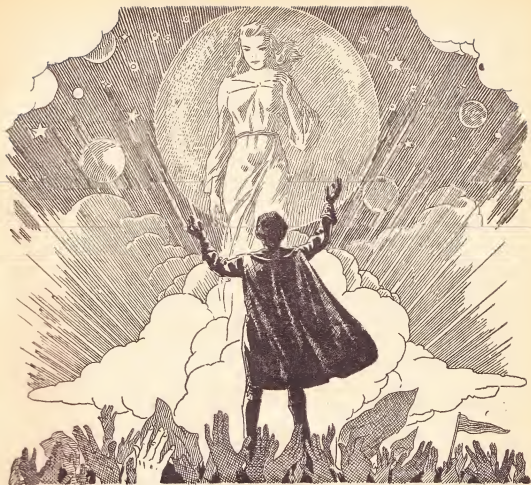
I'm warning you lugs—if anybody calls me Baby Face again—well, I'm warning you, that's all!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

SCIENCE IS GOLDEN

A Pete Manx Story

By KELVIN KENT



HERO

By
HORACE L. GOLD

*They flung roses
... and loneliness
... along his path*

JOE LYONS should have been glad to be so close to home. The Earth turned ponderously on his right, and the moon lay stolidly before him—and behind him was the red pinpoint of Mars.

It had been three years since he had seen that sight, but there was no nostalgic lump in his throat, picturing himself home at last with his mother and brother. Lyons had the important problem of approaching Earth at the correct angle, distance and speed.

His automatic distance-finder triangulated his position in space. The integrator figured his position in relation to

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published in Oct. 1939 Thrilling Wonder Stories*

Earth at his present speed, and the angle at which he would approach it.

He made the slight changes the figures called for, blasting his bow tubes once at full speed, then at quarter capacity, and correcting his course by an eighth stern port blast that brought the ship pointing a degree over to the left of the moon. Earth was blowing up to an enormous, shining globe. At the right moment—

Nine times he circled the world, his speed gradually falling from miles a second to miles a minute; and then the air was screaming around the hull. He was over Africa. He turned the bow north, until he flew over the Pacific.

He overtook California, the Rockies, the Middle-west; and in the distance he could see the Atlantic seaboard. Only then did he close the radio circuit, for instructions from the home port.

"Hello, Lyons!" an excited voice broke out. "Ronkonkoma calling Lyons. If you hear me, please answer—"

The sound shocked him into dumbness. After three years of hearing no Earthly voice. . . .

Experimentally, he cleared his throat to test the quality of the sound it produced.

"Lyons speaking," he said uncertainly.

"Anything wrong, Lyons?" the voice rushed out in anxiety. "We spotted you four hours ago—been trying to get you ever since. Anything wrong?"

"N-nothing wrong," he said in a careful monotone, though he was not sure his voice would not crack, squeak or stop altogether.

"Fine!" the announcer cried. "It sure is great to hear you, Lyons!" Then, suddenly businesslike: "Cut your speed, Lyons. Pittsburgh just reported sighting you flashing overhead at a rate that'll shoot you right past us."

"Okay," Lyons said.

HE HELD down the bow studs until he could feel the ship sinking slightly with the loss of momentum. He leaned forward and stared at the keel

visi-plate. Low, broad buildings, none more than forty stories tall; an unscientific hodgepodge of narrow and wide streets, less than half of them mechanized, in spite of the three years he had been away.

"Isn't that Philadelphia under me?" he asked.

"Yeah. You should be here in about ten minutes. Brake when you cross Long Island City."

"Are you all clear down there?" Lyons asked.

The announcer's next words mystified him. "Boy, *are* we! You're the only ship coming in here today, Lyons. Everybody else is rerouted over to Ashokan."

"What's the idea?"

"Don't ask questions, pal. Just keep a'coming, fast as you can. You can't get here too fast to suit us. But be careful, will you?"

Ronkonkoma, set aside just for his small ship? Ashokan would be mobbed, swamped with all the ships that usually landed and took off in both ports. It was senseless. They would jam themselves up with an unnecessary snarl of rocket traffic—

"Making repairs down there?" he asked puzzledly.

"Nope. The place was never in better shape. How does it feel to be back, pal?"

"Not bad," Lyons said abstractedly.

"That all?" the announcer shouted.

But Lyons was busy with his controls. The gigantic buildings, square-roofed for helicopter landings; web-bridged; levels of mechanized ways and traffic streets; the air lanes swarming.

Manhattan, and danger of collision. He nosed up, out of the air lanes, over the East River, free now of bridges, and across Queens. Steadily, he checked his rushing speed. The long oval of Lake Ronkonkoma lay directly ahead.

Lyons was not stolidly unemotional. He had a job of landing to do, and he had to do it efficiently. Any other Globe-Circler rocket pilot would have behaved the same way. The important thing was get your ship down safely—it repre-

sented an enormous investment.

Thinking of nothing but the job at hand, Lyons kicked up the stern, braked until the ship's bow fluttered over the hangars and angled down in a long dive, straight for the water.

Blackness, the tumbling, hissing, swooping blackness of water, drowned all of his visi-plates, smashing along the hull with a deafening roar.

Suddenly the water glowed yellow. He headed directly for the lights. The ship faltered, sagged heavily, its last momentum swiftly dying. It sank unevenly to the bottom.

Something gripped it and dragged it across the bed of the lake and up, until it burst into the light and over the shore, between the passenger and freight platforms of the tremendous rocket station.

"Okay, Lyons," the announcer cried eagerly. "Come on out!"

But Lyons sat numbly in his oil pressure chair, scared stiff.

"I—I can't!" he stammered. "All those people—"

They were packed densely on both platforms. Nervously he began to understand why all rocket traffic had been rerouted from Ronkonkoma. He could not hear the noise of the crowd, though he could see mouths open widely, arms wave hysterically, noisemakers whirring.

"I—d-don't want t-to come out," he whispered.

Through the double hull he heard faint pounding.

"Come on, Lyons!" the announcer pleaded. "Get it over with. You can't stay in there all day."

So many people to face, Lyons thought frantically. Even a few would make him self-conscious. Alone so long in the silence, no one to speak to—he wasn't even sure he could talk sense any more. There had been long months of dreadful, absolute, vacuum silence, alone in a cramped ship with even the nearest planets remote points of light. And there had been no one to tell him, whether his gabblings were coherent.

"I can't face them," he muttered, cowering in his seat.

"Stop that nonsense, Lyons!" the announcer rapped sternly. "If they have to, they'll cut their way in. You might as well open the door."

LYONS stood up shakily, trying desperately not to look at the visi-plates, so frighteningly crowded with people. Holding on to the high, thick back of the control seat, he moved to the door. His feet were ton weights, his knees sagged miserably under the unaccustomed drag of gravity.

The pounding on the hull was growing louder. If he didn't open the port, they would cut their way in and drag him out. Then he'd get a bawling out from headquarters for letting his ship be scuttled.

It wouldn't last long, he told himself anxiously. He could make some excuse and break away. Landsickness—fever—maybe he could get the authorities to rush him to a hospital, and quiet. He stumbled through the hold corridor he had walked along so many times in the past three years that he knew every weld seam and rivet, every plate in the floor. He walked on past the stairwell that led down to the ground level gang hole. Reluctant to leave the ship that had been his sole home and companion for three years, he clung to the wheel of the airlock. Conscious of the pounding so close to him now, he backed away from the inner airlock, staring at it. He could leave it at lock position. He could slink behind the fuel hoses and hide there if they cut their way in. He would be out of the noise and swarm he dreaded just that much longer.

But he couldn't, of course. His mother, his brother, his friends—were they still alive? Somehow he had to get past that mob and find them. That, suddenly, became his most overwhelming apprehension.

He whirled the airlock wheel until it came to rest, shot the bolts out of their holes. Air rushed in to fill the partial

vacuum that in nearly a year of space travel had been caused by the slow leakage through the great outside washer.

The noise was closer. If they would only give him a chance to get used to the sound of human voices and the press of crowds! Normally he was not afraid of people. But this was so sudden—the change from silence to deafening clamor.

His hands shook so that he could scarcely make them grip the outer airlock wheel. That one he turned very slowly, reluctantly. He clutched the lever that drew in the safety bolts, listening intently for sounds to come through the thick, insulated door. There was dead silence, almost as if he were still out in space. He could no longer hear the terrifying din, and that gave him courage.

He threw the lever. Abruptly, he leaped back. The outer lock crashed in, forced by the weight that had been pressing against it.

A mob! Rushing in to snatch at him!

He could not close the inner airlock. It was too late. Men and women were surrounding him, pawing at him, shouting at him. Men and women dressed in formal red skin-tight spun glass suits with flowing green capes of synthetic fur and narrow-brimmed or brimless toques.

"Commander Lyons!" a red-faced, portly man boomed, grabbing his limp hand. "I am Abner Connaught, elected President of the World-State, in your absence. In the name of the peoples of Earth, I welcome you."

"Commander Lyons?" the space aviator stammered. "Why, I'm just a regular rocket pilot."

He flushed when the crowd laughed. The word passed along to those at the distant ends of the platforms, then the entire rocket station, packed with people, howled with laughter.

He hung back, ashamed, angry.

THE men and women who ringed him were evidently politicians and officials, for when they urged him out of the air-

lock and onto the platform, the crowd respectfully surged away.

He found himself at a battery of microphones, facing another battery of television scanners, inside a circle of armed police. Beyond, the mob milled, trying to get him—yelling, waving arms.

President Connaught drew him before the microphones. Unwinking, the giant television eyes stared at him.

"Fellow citizens of the World-State," the President's voice boomed again, "three years ago we watched Commander Lyons flash away from Earth, out into space—an intrepid explorer flying through the uncharted wastes of nothingness toward Mars, there to solve the mystery of its possible commercial value.

"For three years we have watched and prayed for his safe return. Now, at last, he returns to us, modest as ever, unchanged by the acid test he has gone through. We are grateful for his safe return and—"

On and on and on, in the changeless formula of politicians since the world began. Lyons had to stand uneasily while the blank-eyed scanners stared at him and the mob behind glowered at the police guard; but at least they were silent now.

He shifted from one foot to the other. His hands hung down clumsily; he could find nothing to do with them. And, all the while, the blank, terrifying stares that he could not avoid.

Nervously, he turned his head. Outside of the ring of officials, two faces leaped into his sight—immobile, remote faces that smiled at him, almost as if he were a stranger.

"Mom!" he cried. "Sid!"

Simultaneously, their faces grew pale and distressed. They pursed their lips behind their forefingers warningly, to hush him.

For President Connaught had wheeled about, gripped his shoulder, and was saying: "Now, Commander, tell us what you found on Mars. Remember, my lad, the entire world is listening reverently for your first words."

Lyons gazed in frozen fascination at the microphones. His mind refused to think of two words that could possibly be connected. He stood trembling, unable to speak, as the crowd became restless. The President glanced at him curiously.

"I—I can't!" he moaned.

His nerve broke suddenly; he stumbled to his mother, threw his arms around her.

"I—I can't talk to—to them," he stammered.

"Please, Joseph," she whispered, "for my sake."

He drew away from her. "Joseph?" he asked. "Not Joey any more?"

Gently, his brother Sid caught his arm and led him toward the microphones.

"I know how you feel," he said in a low, tense voice. "That's why a speech was written for you. Just read off that paper they gave you."

Lyons looked at the paper, glanced around pleadingly. Sid and his mother motioned him forward. The President smiled encouragingly and put him before the frightening array of broadcasting equipment.

He began to read. The words were meaningless to him, and he read in a flat, hurried, rattling voice, without pause or inflection, glad he did not have to think of what to say. It was all there on the paper, whatever it meant.

He scarcely realized he had finished until President Connaught patted him on the back and said:

"Thank you, Commander. That was splendidly put. And now, fellow citizens, let us wait patiently until Commander Lyons is rested and his Martian films developed, when we shall hear more from him. I am sure our patience will be well rewarded."

A DETACHMENT of police surrounded Lyons and his family and made a way through the crowd to a long, sleek car outside the rocket station. Two men sat in the rear. Lyons stopped uncertainly when he saw them smiling at him.

"It's all right, Joseph," his mother said soothingly. "They're Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley. You know them, don't you?"

The president and the treasurer of Globe-Circlers! "Hello," Lyons murmured respectfully. "It's nice of you to be here."

"Modest as ever," Morrison said, and laughed. "Eh, Bentley?"

The treasurer grinned. All at once, the car was in motion and swooped into the tunnel highway toward New York. Sid and his mother sat nervously facing young Lyons, their mouths tight in humorless, formal smiles.

"Is my old room ready for me, Mom?" he asked desperately trying to make conversation.

His mother looked embarrassed.

"I don't know how to say this, Commander," Bentley said, at last. "I think you'll prefer having us be frank with you."

"Certainly," Lyons replied.

"Well, you must give up ideas of going back to your old life. No more small apartments or flying. You're a world hero, you know."

"Sure," Sid added brightly. "You're on top of the heap, Joe."

"A world hero?" Lyons asked quizzically. "What's that?"

"It's an old word we rediscovered," Morrison volunteered. "It seems that in our prosaic civilization, until now, there was not sufficient public interest in a single man to make him a hero. In your case, the situation got somewhat out of hand. The newscasters made so much of your flight that the public elevated you to the position of hero. To capitalize on your fame, you must live up to it."

Lyons felt uncomfortable. "I don't understand—"

"Through you," Bentley said, "the world can advance centuries at a leap. Interplanetary travel, on schedule—the riches of the other planets—"

Lyons nodded. "But how do I do all that?"

"All the planets are open to our ex-

ploration," Morrison explained. "Globe-Circlers has built two interplanetary ships—yours and a newer, larger one—the first of what will eventually be a great fleet of space liners. Obviously, a single group of stockholders hasn't the money to build all that are needed. Therefore, we put up you, Commander Lyons, in whom the public has enormous confidence; the public puts up the money to build the ships; and we call the fleet the Lyons Line."

"It's the grandest opportunity in the world for you, Joseph," his mother put in.

Sid shook his arm excitedly. "You'll be president of the new company, Joe! And they're going to give me a big job too!"

"And I'd like to help all I can," Lyons admitted. "Only I don't see how I fit in as president of the company. I'm just a pilot."

His mother said: "Don't worry about it, Joseph. Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley will tell you what you have to do and when to do it."

"It'll be an irresistible combination," Morrison declared, tapping Lyons' knee, "your reputation, our commercial experience and the money we shall allow the public to invest. Just leave everything to us, Commander, and we'll be top men in this little old world!"

They rushed through the tunnel without encountering any traffic, which had been rerouted to the surface highways. When they came up into an upper city street level the driver swung the car uptown, then under a building that Lyons recognized as the Grand American Hotel. Earth's largest and most expensive.

"Well, Commander," Bentley said expansively, as they went toward the glittering elevator, "here's where you're going to live. In the Grand American Hotel!"

Lyons blinked. "It's nice, but I wouldn't feel right in a place like this. I wish you'd let me stay in my old room at home."

"Now, Joseph," his mother protested. "Mr. Morrison and Mr. Bentley hired an entire floor of the hotel for you. Besides, I gave up our little fiat. It was no place for us."

"I liked it," Lyons said wistfully.

He let himself be guided up to a lavishly suite of rooms. In the huge foyer he hesitated, confused. A staff of servants—it seemed like hundreds to him—was lined up for his inspection. They all bowed low.

EMBARRASSED, Joe Lyons sidled around them into a lavishly furnished living room. He could see through the doors into other rooms, carpeted with gorgeous, thick-napped rugs, furnished extravagantly.

"I'd never get used to it," he mumbled. "It scares me."

"Nonsense, my boy," Morrison said. "In no time you'll be striding around as if you were born here. Anyhow, the public expects the president of the Lyons Line to live in a place that fits his position."

"I guess so," Lyons' space-tanned brow creased. "But it still doesn't seem right. You built a space ship and I flew it. I've been handling G-C rockets for the last ten years and according to the tests I was the fittest pilot. That's all it was."

"But if the people want you to be president of the company, Joseph," his mother said, "that's all there is to it."

"Sure, if it means giving space travel a boost. That's my ambition."

"Quite right, Commander," Bentley approved, putting a sheaf of papers and a pen in his hand. "Would you mind signing at the bottom, please?"

Obligingly, Lyons scrawled his signature.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"These are the Lyons Line incorporation documents. You have accepted the presidency of the company."

Morrison folded the papers, and put them in his pocket. He shook Lyons' hand. "We'll leave you now, my boy."

Get some sleep. We'll see you tomorrow."

His mother kissed him, and left with his brother Sid.

A butler entered. "Dinner is served, sir. If you wish to sleep, your bedroom is ready."

He was hungry and tired. He managed to eat, though a crew of servants kept slipping plates under his nose. He could hardly wait to sleep in a soft bed with cool white sheets.

In the bedroom he began zipping down the talon fastener of his trim blue jacket, then paused. His forearm had touched a bulge in the breast pocket. He had been so confused he had forgotten it, which he had never thought possible. From his pocket he drew out a statuette.

A photo-statue, made of developer plastic, in natural color. Anyone would have recognized it as a product of a sculptor-camera; but the statue itself would have caused amazement.

"Lehli," he whispered to it.

The sadly smiling little face did not change. In his imagination he could see the red iron-oxide sand of Mars beneath her tiny sandaled feet, just as it had been when he had taken the picture. The shining black hair was only printed on smooth plastic, but he could imagine its silky wealth, could vision the lovely, delicate, sensitive features; the slim body in its flowing white toga.

"Cahm bakh ssoon, Joyeee," he heard the sweet, sibilant voice echo.

"Gosh, I wish I could, Lehli," he whispered. "But it looks like I won't be able to do it for quite awhile. But sooner or later I'll be back with you, Lehli, darling, when I'm not needed around here."

HE PLACED the statuette gently on the night table and undressed. On the return from Mars, he had thought expectantly of invigorating showers, for lack of gravity did not allow them on shipboard. But he was too exhausted to do anything but fall into bed. Funny, he thought unhappily, how Sid and his mother had changed; no warmth at all.

Nothing like Lehli who had been so generously affectionate.

A hand, shaking his shoulder, roused him out of his slumber. He opened his eyes and saw Sid bending over him. His mother smiled at him from the foot of the bed.

"My goodness!" she said. "You certainly must have been tired. You've been asleep almost twenty-four hours."

He yawned and stretched, threw the covers off and stood on the floor.

"Boy, I sure feel better. I bet I could've slept a week if you'd let me."

"Sorry, Joe," Sid apologized. "We had to wake you. There's going to be a big blow-out for you tonight—official reception and all that stuff, and you're supposed to make the first announcement of the new company."

"Well, gosh, Sid," Lyons complained. "I was sort of hoping I'd have a day to myself. I wanted to look up some of my old pilot buddies—"

"Some of them'll be at the reception." Sid broke in abruptly. "But Joe, you've got to think of yourself last, the way we've learned to. You're the biggest public figure in the world today. Everything depends on you, and it all has to work out!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, tonight's the official reception. You make the announcement and the public gets interested. Tomorrow you inspect the space ship that's going to take off in the afternoon. The public buys our stocks, see?"

"Space ship?" Lyons asked. "For where?"

"Your recording instruments and films and all that scientific stuff is being analyzed by our scientists. They'll be finished in time to make any changes in the equipment that'll be necessary."

"The ship's going to Mars?" Lyons asked eagerly.

"Yep, the first of the Lyons Line."

"Boy, if I could only be on her!" Lyons exclaimed.

It was impossible, of course. He had his duty to do first.

"What is this, Joseph?" his mother was demanding. She was holding the photo-statue. "Who is she?"

"Lehli, a Martian girl," he said. "I—I'm going to marry her."

"Marry her? With that horrible coppery skin? Oh, Joseph, the girls on Earth are much nicer!"

"That's protective coloration," he protested. "Cuts off actinic rays."

"But a Martian! Maybe she isn't even human!"

"Yes, she is. Her folks escaped from Earth before one of the ice ages."

Sid grinned knowingly. "One of those savages, eh, Joe?"

Lehli, descendant of the gentle, cultured Martian race, a savage? Lyons' face went white and his hands clenched.

"You'll give her up for my sake?" his mother pleaded.

"But Mom—"

They heard the elevator door slide open.

"That's Morrison and Bentley, Mom," Sid said quickly. "Go out and talk to them. I'll help Joe get dressed." When she had left, he said to his brother: "Don't worry Mom like that, Joe. You know you can't go back and marry that Martian girl. Your place is here, advancing interplanetary travel. Besides, you know how she worries about us—Dad killed in a crack-up, either of us liable to do the same. Morrison is going to marry her if this deal goes through, and she likes him a lot. It'll be a great break for all of us."

"Yeah, I know," Lyons said doubtfully. "I'll do what I'm supposed to, but after that's finished there's no reason why I can't go back to Mars."

Sid didn't answer but his face was grimly abstracted. Lyons allowed himself to be put into a formal red spun-glass suit, clasped the green cape around his throat and donned a brimless toque. In spite of his discomfort in civilian clothes, he was handsome and dashing.

took the single glass it contained and drank the vitalizing breakfast cocktail. Then he followed Sid into the sitting room. Morrison, Bentley, his mother were there—and a beautiful girl. They shook hands with him.

"What a change in you, Commander," Morrison said. "Nothing like a good sleep to put you on your feet." He led the girl forward. "This is Mona Trent—our most famous and glamorous studio star."

"How do you do, Miss Trent?" Lyons murmured.

"Not Miss Trent. Call her Mona, and please be very attentive to her," Bentley adjured. "Think of the publicity—pairing off the two most popular young people in the world today!"

Mona smiled charmingly and took his arm as they entered the elevator. But descending to the main floor and walking through corridors to the vast ballroom, packed with people and audio-casting equipment, Lyons was wondering how interplanetary travel could be advanced by his being attentive to a beautiful audio actress.

People jumped to their feet when they entered. Lyons felt his nervousness coming back. Hands were shoved out at him to be shaken. He shook them obediently. A paper was put in his limp grip and he was brought before the battery of audio microphones and scanners. By staring at the paper and thinking of nothing else, he was able to read off his speech without too much trouble.

Then they ate; speeches were blasted at him; and Mona sat at his right, gazing adoringly at him and angrily demanding that he be more attentive, when no one could hear. Passively, he listened when she whispered meaningless nonsense at him, apparently just to make him look at her.

"Don't be so stupid," she breathed, while her eyes were melting at him. "Smile. Laugh. It's for the effect."

He tried to, but whispering idiotic gabble at her was something beyond him. He was straightforward, as were most rocket pilots. He could see the

THE butler was standing outside the door with a tray in his hands. Lyons

strategy in being courteous to investors who could advance rocketry; but he couldn't understand the need for acting as if he loved a popular audio star.

She finally demanded that he dance with her. He swept around the floor with her in his arms. Embarrassingly, everybody got off the dance floor as soon as he stepped on it; but she refused to let him stop.

He saw the crowd in confusion. In the compact rows of faces he saw—old buddies of his!

He halted abruptly and walked eagerly toward them, his hand out in greeting. They jumped up and took his hand, grinning a little uncomfortably.

"Gosh, it's great to see part of the old gang again," he enthused. "How about coming up to my place when this brawl's over?"

"Well, we'd sure like to, Commander," Sam Martin, one of them said. "But, hell, roughneck pilots like us can't be seen with a hero like you."

"Quit your kidding, fellers," Lyons said, and laughed.

He introduced Mona. Curiously, their discomfort increased. He sat down and tried to draw them out in conversation. They spoke only when he addressed them, and then in the most deadening respectful tones. Gradually, he was growing more puzzled, defeated and lonely, when Mona led him back to the floor.

WHY was everybody so cold and remote? Not only his old buddies, but even his mother and Sid. Despite his loyalty, he was forced to admit that. Mona Trent did not baffle him. She only regarded him as another leading man.

But everybody else—why weren't they as friendly as they used to be? Why didn't they give him the companionship he craved?

Lehli was not like that. Lehli was warm, generous, affectionate—and understanding. . . .

The next day, standing inside the space ship, waiting for the portable audiocasting equipment to be assembled

so he could address the entire world as if he were the greatest expert on rocketry, he felt like the last fool in creation. All this—simply because he had been lucky enough not to have his own ship smashed either by a meteor or by an error in landing.

Mona Trent hung on his arm; Morrison and Bentley were close by; Sid and his mother, of course, could only look on at a distance at a launching exhibition.

"What do you think of her?" Morrison boasted. "First of the fleet!"

"She's a beauty," Lyons admitted.

"If we play our cards right, my boy," Morrison whispered in his ear, "we'll be billionaires! The public's already hollering to buy!"

"I wasn't thinking about making a lot of money," Lyons said. "All I want to do is help out all I can, and go back—"

"Hold it, Commander," Bentley interrupted. "The audios are ready."

Joe Lyons began walking through the ship, praising it into the microphones. In this he was sincere; she was the finest, most modern, most completely equipped space ship he had even thought possible.

He spoke simply and effectively. Then he took a prepared speech out of his pocket and began reading it. It was mostly a repetition of what he had already said two or three times—the profit possibilities of space travel, the commercial value of the other planets civilization reaching upward.

His eyes were traveling slightly ahead of his voice when he saw a paragraph that shocked him speechless. It read:

I hesitate to bring my personal affairs into a momentous occasion like this; but I am sure you will all be happy to hear of my engagement to the most beautiful girl in the Universe—Mona Trent! For three years we have been separated. . . .

He glared furiously at Morrison and Bentley. They looked anxious as they gestured him to read on. Grimly his mouth tightened. He walked swiftly away from the audiocasters. Morrison had to jump in and take over.

Bentley and Mona tried to follow Lyons. He slammed a door on them and strode alone through the magnificent control cabin, the living quarters, the laboratory, the cargo hold. There he paused and put his hand into an open crate.

DAMN them all, he swore, let them use him all they wanted to, let them make billionaires of themselves—he didn't care, if rocketry could be helped only in that way. But they'd made a damn hero out of him, cut him off from his friends, turned Sid and his mother into schemers—and now were trying to force him into marrying a girl he didn't love!

Sid or his mother must have told Morrison and Bentley about Lehli, and to prevent—

He stalked back, stiff-legged and ominous. Sam Martin, the same old buddy he had seen the night before, stepped forward and saluted.

"We leave in ten minutes, sir!"

Lyons was supposed to shake hands with the crew and wish them luck, and he did. But when the audiocasters left and Mona angrily followed them, Lyons stood stubbornly still.

"Come on, Commander," Bentley urged. "They're going to take off."

Lyons folded his arms. Anxiously, they tried to hurry him. He shook them off savagely.

"What's wrong, my boy?" Morrison asked, surprised.

"I picked up a ray-gun in the hold—" Lyons began meaningly.

"Stop talking nonsense and come along," Bentley said, annoyed.

Suddenly a gun had leaped into Lyons' hand. He was menacing the crew coldly.

"Out of here, you two," he snapped at Bentley and Morrison. "As for the rest of you, I'll blast my way to the controls if I have to!"

Bentley and Morrison did not resist when he jabbed his gun into their backs

and forced them to the airlock.

"Walk out of here naturally," he grated, "or you'll have a sweet scandal on your hands. So long!"

Their faces were pale, but somehow they managed to walk out. The crowd burst into cheers—which were abruptly shut off. Lyons closed the outer airlock, whirled the wheel, shot the bolts; did the same with the inner port. He thrust his gun at the crew.

"Get to your stations," he ordered coldly. "I'm going along on this ride!" His chin set. "Go on—get!" he rasped.

One moment more they hesitated, then grins crossed their faces.

"Sure," Sam Martin said. "What the hell're we to stop you? Nothing but a bunch of globe-circlers, not a hero in us."

Lyons searched their faces for irony that was not there.

"Cut it out, boys!" he begged. "You guys have known me for years. I'm still the same Joe Lyons! No hero, either!"

The ship started to move along the mechanized ways to the take-off gun.

"Don't wanna contradict, Commander," Sam Martin said seriously, "but flying between Earth and Mars, alone, does leave a mark on a guy. Either he cracks or he comes out a hero. You're a hero—even if you don't wanna be one. We're all together now, though, depending on each other—and on you!"

In the same ship with four of his oldest friends!

Perhaps on Mars he'd be only a human being again—not a lonely hero.

Smiling, Lyons pressed his forearm against Lehli's statuette inside his jacket, and then he turned his head away. It wasn't right for men to see tears in a hero's eyes.





*When you're born, you come in crying, and when you leave,
we cry for you, so it's really—*

Too Bad You Died

By JOSEPH SLOTKIN

HIYA, sucker!

Just a second, I want to take another bite out of this Venusian pear-orange . . . mmmm! Good!

Ha, they're juicy this time of year. I'll *never* be able to get enough of 'em, if I live to be a million. And I will.

Still there? Well, you haven't got anywhere else to go, have you? But I have. And, brother, I'm *going* there. Got lots of time, too. And when I get

tired of where I've been, I'll go where I haven't been. It's a bi-i-g universe. Expanding, too. Ahhhh! It's good to be alive.

Hmmm? Oh, you just missed. Uh-huh, that's right. Just born a little too late, is all. Tough. Too bad. Too bad you had to go and die.

Oh, well, you would have been pretty old anyhow by the time we discovered how to live on and on and on . . . pretty

old and decrepit, I'd say. What? About a hundred? Well, we *could* have made you twenty again. But you died. Well, serves you right.

What? Sure, it serves you right. Stupid. That's what you were. You and all the others. If a man's sucker enough to be satisfied with living eighty—ninety years and then dying, well then he gets what he deserves when he dies.

Dies, and moulders and decays, and doesn't taste or feel, or hear or smell anymore. Forever.

What was it some ancient poet once said about death? "Sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything. . . ."

Sure, I'm rubbing it in. So what? Your own fault, I tell you. You *could* have lived forever. But what did you do? You wasted your time.

You worked in the fields, and made plastic fire engines, and added up rows of figures in a bank or robbed a bank, and operated a drill press or drilled teeth, and carried the mail or mailed it, and drove a taxicab, and when there was a war to be fought you went to war, and then came back, depending on how lucky you thought you were, and went right on waiting on tables or getting under them, and writing poetry, and designing dresses, and welding automobile bodies guaranteed for ninety days or 4,000 miles, and joining fraternities. . . .

But you did it by yourself, and for yourself, but not *of* yourself. You did it in a vacuum, and you know how old Mother N feels about *that*.

Ever watch a bunch of sheep in a pen? That was you. Ever think of how quick they could all get out if they ever got together and rammed down that gate? Do they ever do it?

Judas, no! Lamb chops!

Funny kind of civilization you had, where sheep made pens that were guaranteed to last a lifetime. Maybe you were afraid if you lived too long the pens would wear out.

Of course, if you outwore the pens, you'd be wordless, and then you'd have to think, wouldn't you? Maybe even

come up with telepathy. We've got that now, too.

OH, IF I wanted to, I could study for one of your lifetimes, and come up with some pretty fancy poetry about sheep, and pens and all that. I guess I will, one of these centuries. I've studied medicine, and physics, engineering and chemistry so far—yes, and space navigation and rocket design, too. Took me five hundred years. But so what? It was fun. I had plenty of time, and I slept good, and ate good.

Oh, the food! You don't get tired of food when you're healthy, you know. The things I've tasted! Fresh, cool tangy berries from the hills of Mars, and little roasted birds snared in the forests of Venus, and breads made out of grains grown on the moons of Jupiter! Luscious steaks of the star-calves, thousand-pound natives of Neptune, and the dainty, light little cakes concocted on Mercury.

Wines, aged on Sirius, and champagne, seasoned on Far Centaurus. Sparkling ales, brewed a billion miles from the sun, and flavored with the crystal waters that ooze from the rocks on Pluto.

And women! Man! I've got thousands of descendants, each one a beautiful memory. Ever think about it—a lifetime's not really nearly long enough to figure out how to *begin* to make love?

Sucker, that's you.

Well, you missed out, that's all. You rationalized it beautifully, though . . . ranted about the "Hedonic tone," and "life everlasting," and "compensation."

But you died.

That's why I say it serves you right. You could have found out how to live forever by 1960, but you were too suspicious of each other, and too busy making complexion cream and dime store jewelry, and hair lotion and a lot of other junk.

Go ahead, brush your teeth, put a dime-store jewel, or even the Hope Emeralds, one in each eye socket, pour

some hair lotion on your skull, and then look at me, eating this broiled Venus apple. Sucker!

Hmmm? Oh, it was a fellow name of Hawkins finally turned the trick. Common name. Just got tired of seeing people die. Figured with a democracy, maybe he could get a pressure group together and vote death out of existence.

Sure, he did it. Got petitions, and interested backers, and went to Washington, What backers? Oh, just people who didn't want to die. Who ever *wanted* to die? Did you?

When you were living, did you ever stop to think of the billions of dollars, and trillions of man-hours, and quadrillions of skillions of atoms that were being wasted on things that couldn't possibly add up to living forever?

Ever stop to think of that while you were attending a funeral? Of your mother, say, or—father, or sweetheart, wife, son, daughter?

If every plastic hair comb, chrome radiator grille, martini, anti-aircraft gun, and flower pot were piled beside your future coffin, would you trade?

Maybe you would. Because I guess you did. And don't tell me you weren't ready. Wanting to means being ready.

Why am I rubbing it in? Oh, I don't

know. I don't *mean* to be cruel. I've still got human emotions, you know. Maybe I'm covering up. It just seems the stupidest kind of blindness—when if you and everybody else had just taken time out from selling fur coats and refrigerators and washing machines, from grabbing a couple of bucks to get by with, or to lay aside for a couple more years of poor eyesight and plastic dentures and fading perceptions in retirement, and all got together, putting first things first sooner, maybe you'd still be here today, on this Earth.

Maybe if you'd just taken more interest in that big bio-chemical project Hawkins finally swung, well, I wouldn't have to be reaching out this way, from my universe to your universe.

After all, I don't *like* standing here by your grave every year and laying down a memorial wreath you can't smell, saying a prayer you can't hear, crying tears you can't see.

God didn't make them any better than you, and no matter what universes I roam through in all eternity, the feelings we had for each other will never be duplicated. And, after all, you *were* my father.

So long, Mr. Hawkins, Senior. Too bad you died.



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THE WAR of the WEEDS

by CARL JACOBI

AT TEN o'clock on the morning of May 3, 1956, Harold Field, hired man on the farm of Gustav Peterson in Carver County, Minnesota, was alone in the east field that skirts highway No. 7,

seeding corn. Resting a moment to light his pipe, he was suddenly knocked to the ground by what seemed a blinding flash of light and a thunderous report.

When he opened his eyes, it was to gaze upon an upraised mound of earth, the center of which

They'd all go mad before they could stop these weeds and their uncanny influence!



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strategy in being courteous to investors who could advance rocketry; but he couldn't understand the need for acting as if he loved a popular audio star.

She finally demanded that he dance with her. He swept around the floor with her in his arms. Embarrassingly, everybody got off the dance floor as soon as he stepped on it; but she refused to let him stop.

He saw the crowd in confusion. In the compact rows of faces he saw—old buddies of his!

He halted abruptly and walked eagerly toward them, his hand out in greeting. They jumped up and took his hand, grinning a little uncomfortably.

"Gosh, it's great to see part of the old gang again," he enthused. "How about coming up to my place when this brawl's over?"

"Well, we'd sure like to, Commander," Sam Martin, one of them said. "But, hell, roughneck pilots like us can't be seen with a hero like you."

"Quit your kidding, fellers," Lyons said, and laughed.

He introduced Mona. Curiously, their discomfort increased. He sat down and tried to draw them out in conversation. They spoke only when he addressed them, and then in the most deadening respectful tones. Gradually, he was growing more puzzled, defeated and lonely, when Mona led him back to the floor.

WHY was everybody so cold and remote? Not only his old buddies, but even his mother and Sid. Despite his loyalty, he was forced to admit that. Mona Trent did not baffle him. She only regarded him as another leading man.

But everybody else—why weren't they as friendly as they used to be? Why didn't they give him the companionship he craved?

Lehli was not like that. Lehli was warm, generous, affectionate—and understanding. . . .

The next day, standing inside the space ship, waiting for the portable audiocasting equipment to be assembled

so he could address the entire world as if he were the greatest expert on rocketry, he felt like the last fool in creation. All this—simply because he had been lucky enough not to have his own ship smashed either by a meteor or by an error in landing.

Mona Trent hung on his arm; Morrison and Bentley were close by; Sid and his mother, of course, could only look on at a distance at a launching exhibition.

"What do you think of her?" Morrison boasted. "First of the fleet!"

"She's a beauty," Lyons admitted.

"If we play our cards right, my boy," Morrison whispered in his ear, "we'll be billionaires! The public's already hollering to buy!"

"I wasn't thinking about making a lot of money," Lyons said. "All I want to do is help out all I can, and go back—"

"Hold it, Commander," Bentley interrupted. "The audios are ready."

Joe Lyons began walking through the ship, praising it into the microphones. In this he was sincere; she was the finest, most modern, most completely equipped space ship he had even thought possible.

He spoke simply and effectively. Then he took a prepared speech out of his pocket and began reading it. It was mostly a repetition of what he had already said two or three times—the profit possibilities of space travel, the commercial value of the other planets civilization reaching upward.

His eyes were traveling slightly ahead of his voice when he saw a paragraph that shocked him speechless. It read:

I hesitate to bring my personal affairs into a momentous occasion like this; but I am sure you will all be happy to hear of my engagement to the most beautiful girl in the Universe—Mona Trent! For three years we have been separated. . . .

He glared furiously at Morrison and Bentley. They looked anxious as they gestured him to read on. Grimly his mouth tightened. He walked swiftly away from the audiocasters. Morrison had to jump in and take over.

ly through the field, cutting off bloom after bloom, studying them. At length he looked up.

"On the surface, the phenomenon is simple," he said. "The brittle tops of these weeds form an almost perfect musical instrument, and when the wind blows they give forth a sound. Each bloom is of a slightly different size, so the tones vary. But do you notice anything about the sound as a whole?"

Gage listened. "Yes," he said. "It sounds as if a high voice were saying over and over again, 'Doom! Doom!'" And so it did. . . .

Continuing his investigation, Calthay found that the weeds reached maturity within the brief period of eight days. A small pouch formed on the stalk then, which opened and spread more seeds to the wind. There was, however, no evidence of the weeds multiplying in any dangerous abundance, a fear which the professor had harbored since he planted the first lot. It was apparent that for successful growth, the earth must be first carefully pulverized.

But by opening these pouches prematurely, planting them in a separate field and making a detailed catalogue of each planting, Calthay made another discovery. The seeds of each weed, he found, propagated a bloom of the exact size and tone-notes as the original.

The scientist mused over this for some time until an idea struck him. Over the dinner table one night in the Peterson house, he spoke to his assistant.

"You used to be interested in music before you turned to science. didn't you?"

Gage nodded. "Directed my college orchestra and learned to play the 'Moonlight Sonata' on the piano," he smiled. "But after that Einstein proved too great a lure. Why?"

Calthay toyed with his fork a moment, then turned to Peterson.

"Is there a fair grounds in the vicinity?" he asked. "Or a place where there's a grandstand that might be available for rent?"

Peterson stared. "Yes," he replied slowly. "The county fair grounds are at Carver, and there's a good-sized grandstand. But what on earth—"

Thereafter for the next three weeks, Calthay and Gage worked in mysterious seclusion. No inkling of what the scientist was up to reached the public until the twentieth of June, when the following notice appeared in the Carver County Clarion:

COSMIC SYMPHONY
CARVER FAIR GROUNDS AT 8 P. M.
ADMISSION FREE

Tonight, assuming meteorological predictions are correct and there will be a sufficiently strong east wind, I shall attempt a musical experiment with the Peterson space-shell weeds. The weeds which have Aeolian properties have been arranged in order of their proper tones, with the same attention to harmony as a pipe organ.

By means of draw-shades I propose to control the wind as much as possible and produce ear-pleasing results.

The public is cordially invited to attend this performance.

PROF. JOHN CALTHAY.

The drawshades were seen by the first arrivals at the fair grounds as large sheets of canvas, strung in triple tiers on wires on the west side of the race track. The fact that these canvas sheets had originally been hay-covers, pressed into service from neighboring farms, detracted little from the public's general excitement.

BUT MORE than Carver County was present. The afternoon train brought representatives of the United Press and Associated Press, in addition to syndicate and feature writers, not to mention Sir Hammond Gore, the eminent music critic of New York City. Also there was Professor Albert de Carta, of the Federal University of Science, and Dr. A. T. Holwell, astronomical authority and author of "Can We Reach Mars?"

Inside the race track a curious sight was revealed. The entire oval arena, which was surrounded by a high board fence, was a field of densely packed

THE WAR OF THE WEEDS

weeds, four to five feet in height, all of them of a luxuriant green color. In the judges' stand before the grandstand Professor Calthay stood, his white locks streaming in the wind. At his side was the ever-present Lawson Gage.

After a short speech in which he spoke of the Peterson shell and its potentialities, Calthay gave a signal, and five of the draw curtains were pulled back. A steady east wind was blowing. The weeds in the arena began to wave and undulate. An instant later the audience sat electrified.

A high melodious chord vibrated through the evening air. Swelling as the wind increased, it reverberated against the grandstand, growing louder and louder.

Up on the west wall of the race track, under the glare of the floodlights, six men on high ladders stood watching Calthay. After a moment the scientist waved his hand. Five curtains were drawn closed, leaving only one open space at the far side of the field.

Almost imperceptibly at first the song of the weeds changed. Slowly it mounted the octaves into a higher register.

The audience was buzzing with excitement now. Once again Calthay raised his hand to give a signal. But abruptly a hush fell on the grounds. Above them the crowd noticed for the first time a black storm cloud. The wind returned with a shriek, and simultaneously something happened.

In the grandstand the crowd rose en masse, raced for the exits. Screams rose up—screams of agony and horror. Seats banged, crashed. A woman stood up, tore insanely at her hair. A man flailed his arms and dived headforemost over the rear wall.

"Stop it! For God's sake, stop it!" somebody yelled.

For five minutes the horror continued. Then the screams died, and the crowd quieted. But none lingered to find an explanation of what had happened. Filing in bewilderment out of the fair grounds,

they stumbled into their cars and drove madly away.

Lawson Gage leaned white-faced against the wall of the judges' stand and stared incredulously at Professor John Calthay.

"In heaven's name," he gasped, "what was it?"

The press went wild after that; and Calthay, in response to popular excitement, called a consultation of three scientists: Gedding, Harcolt and Durose, all of the Federal University of Science. Second, he published an admission of his error in the fair grounds incident. It was absurd, he declared, to believe one could control the amount of wind striking the weeds by such elementary means as shifting canvas curtains. The variation in tone must have been caused by other reasons.

But it was Lawson Gage who hit upon the channel leading to the correct answer.

"Undoubtedly," Gage said, "the thing that upset the audience in the Carver grandstand was some form of sound. Now, we know that the highest sound the human ear can detect is forty-one thousand vibrations per second. The sensory portions of our brain do not register a vibration above that until we come to a frequency of three hundred seventy million, when we begin to see rays of red light.

"It therefore stands to reason that ordinary sound, no matter how high-pitched above the ear's receptive capacity would have no effect on the human body.

"But the thing which came from the space-shell weeds may have been more than sound. Isn't it possible that these weeds, as living organisms developed along an entirely different evolutionary scale, might throw off into the vibratory field some form of energy, which we of Earth cannot understand? Add to that that this energy, a botanical one if you will, is insufferable to the human brain, and you have it."

GAGE may have had it, but the public didn't. Interest continued under force of newspaper sensationalism, then gradually waned. But on July 16th—to use Professor Calthay's own words—hell broke loose.

Three spies, unquestionably in the service of August Strausvig, dictator of the new Middle European Empire, were captured and tried in a military court at Washington, D. C. Two were executed. The third escaped.

And with the third man's escape was announced the disappearance of the Peterson shell, which it will be remembered had been resealed with half of the original weed seeds, and had been kept for convenience's sake in the Peterson farmhouse.

In their room that night, Calthay and Gage discussed the situation.

"I should never have left the shell here unguarded," the scientist said, lines of worry showing in his face. "If my simple experiment in the fair grounds had such a terrible effect on people, who is to say what military-minded scientists might not do with those weeds, working along different lines? I tell you, Gage, the possibilities are horrible."

Lawson Gage nodded. "And not only to the world at large, but to ourselves."

Calthay stared. "What do you mean?"

For answer the assistant got up and went out the door. A moment later he returned to place upon the table a small black box, upon the top of which was mounted an ordinary alarm clock.

"This," he said, "in case you don't recognize it, is an infernal machine, a time bomb. I found it under the house last night but decided to say nothing about it until now. The idea, I believe, was to blow us all to kingdom come."

"But why—who—" There was bewilderment in Calthay's voice.

"Nothing so difficult in that," Gage replied. "As you stated, some foreign power evidently recognized in those weeds a potential instrument for world power. They see in you the only possible

person who could block their plans. So they intend to remove you and perhaps me, too, from the picture!"

And on the fifteenth of August the weed plague suddenly appeared in Ontario. Overnight, it was reported, vast fields of the strange weeds took growth, sown there by an unknown source. A week later the terrible sickness began to strike down the population. The plague was a form of madness, similar to that which had stricken the audience in the Carver grandstand, but a thousand times more virulent. Death came in a few hours. And the weeds seemed impregnable to all attack.

Life in the United States continued unchanged. And then in mid-winter the plague struck lower California.

"It's just as I feared!" Calthay exclaimed. "Some scientist with a brain trained to military destruction has developed those weed seeds. In their new form, they will grow apparently without the pulverization of the soil which I found necessary. Also they are much more powerful. Nothing seems able to stop them. They propagate faster than man can destroy them. And when they sway in the wind, they give forth their vibration and that strange energy which no human brain can stand. The one and only thing in our favor is the time of the year. It will be three months before the seeds can take hold in a northern climate."

Gage nodded tensely. "What are we going to do?" he demanded.

The question was never answered. A roaring crash sounded and the reading lamp at Calthay's side burst into a thousand fragments.

With a single leap the scientist was across to the door, running out into the yard. A tall shadow fled before him. Calthay, his aged legs moving like pistons, raced in pursuit around the west side of the barn and down the lane to the road.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop!"

Two more shots cut lanes of fire

through the blackness. Calthay heard one of them whistle by a scant inch from his ear. But the shadow did not stop. It continued in long, leaping strides. An instant later the roar of a powerful motor sounded, and a car without headlights sped down the road.

"Close," Gage observed dryly. "If you'd been sitting a little nearer that lamp, that bullet would have got you."

NEXT day Calthay caught the afternoon train for Flagstaff, Arizona. Arriving at the famous astronomical observatory there, the scientist announced his mission.

"I want to make a spectroscopic analysis of the light from as many stars of the ninth magnitude as I can."

The first sign of the hysteria which was to follow was now finding its way into the press. Weed fields were springing up in California and New Mexico. Nothing seemed able to halt their advance. There were reports of planes sighted over the Mexican border, dropping small containers which opened when they struck the ground. The War Department had reinforced the border patrol, and National Guard units from three states were called into action.

In some localities the weeds apparently had no harmful effect. But in most cases the opposite was tragically the case. The population of entire towns was wiped out; asylums were being filled with gibbering idiots; inmates who had managed to escape told of a weird sighing chord that seemed to drift on the wind. A chord that brought madness, ending in death.

The United States Department of Agriculture telegraphed Calthay three times, begging him to take charge of the fight against this mysterious menace. Twenty-six of the country's leading botanists were already at work, attempting to produce some means of preventing further germination of the weeds. But Calthay maintained a deliberate silence at his labors in the Flag-

staff observatory.

It was on Christmas Eve that Calthay's work was rewarded with a discovery. In observing the spectroscopic color range of a ninth magnitude star, Melaris-A, through the recently invented Johnson magno-spectroscope, he found unmistakable traces of coronium.

Feverishly he turned the gigantic telescope, studying that section of the heavens. An hour later the scientist packed his bags and raced back to the Peterson farm in Carver County, Minnesota.

"Lawson," he said to his assistant a few moments after his arrival, "I've got it. You remember that the center core of that space-shell was made of coronium. Now, whereas all matter is generally equally divided over the entire universe, coronium is a very rare substance. Even in outer space there are few traces of it. But a spectroscopic examination of that light from Star Melaris-A shows its presence!"

"So what?" Gage interrupted skeptically.

"But don't you see? It means that that shell came from that star. Or rather from one of several dark planets which must be moving in an orbit around Melaris-A, part of another system."

"I still don't see—"

"Let me put it this way. The inhabitants of that planet evidently are faced with cosmic disintegration, which is gradually destroying their atmosphere. They want to make a complete exodus to another planet, and Earth is perhaps one of several likely for their needs and conditions. They realize, however, that the population of Earth is already large and would be in conflict with them—"

"I get it!" cried Gage then. "So they send out that shell filled with seeds, which they hope will kill off the population of Earth—"

Calthay nodded. "Exactly. But conditions here were not precisely as they had expected, and the seeds did not have quite the necessary potency. It remained

for man, in his lust for world power, to develop the seeds and strive for that same purpose. We must stop those weeds!"

"But how?" broke in Gage. "We're back at the same question."

"And I have the answer to that question. The center core of the spaceshell was formed of coronium. It was used because it has a negative effect on the weeds, preventing possible germination. In coronium, therefore, lies our weapon. I'll get in touch with Washington at once!"

PRIOR to 1952, the world's entire supply of coronium gas was limited to the volcano of Despliazzo, in Italy. In 1952 coronium pockets were found at Cotópaxi, Mexico, and in central Colorado. Immediately upon Calthay's secret report to the Secretary of Agriculture, all sources of this gas were tapped. Special stratosphere transports were dispatched to convey natural coronium to a headquarters set up at San Diego.

On March 15th the fears of the world crystallized in a general all-wave radio warning, broadcast from Danzig, new capital of the Middle European Empire. The voice of August Strausvig, dictator, declared:

"The weed plague is a product of Middle European scientists. Only a minute quantity of the seeds at our disposal has been used. But they will be used to destroy entire foreign civilizations unless mass acknowledgment of the authority of our government is made. We have developed the weeds so that their potency will continue as long as we see fit. We give the world one month to decide. One month! Strausvig has spoken!"

Preparations during that month progressed with war-time rapidity. Coronium warehouses were established in New York, in Chicago, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Denver. Experimental bombardments of lower California weed fields already had been entirely successful.

The listed stock of a manufacturer of spray guns skyrocketed thirty points as the company, through mass advertising, disposed of thousands of its products. Fake weed-destroying compounds and plague preventives appeared on the market in great variety.

On both coasts and on the Mexican and Canadian borders, anti-aircraft guns were set up at intervals of every few miles. The United States was arming in the strangest way it had ever known.

Then days of anxious waiting, confusing reports. Strausvig had disappeared! Strausvig was dead! The dictator would strike tomorrow!

Professor Calthay watched the developments with grim eyes.

"Isn't it ironic," he said to Gage, "that the people fear one man on the other side of the earth? But the trouble has its inception millions of miles out in space. And yet one menace is interdependent with the other, with civilization at stake."

April 15th, 1957, dawned a gray day at the Peterson farm, with low-lying clouds and a threat of coming rain. Foreboding hung in the sky. The very air seemed charged with menace.

CALTHAY and Gage sat on the farmhouse veranda, gazing out at the fields. The east field was barren now, the original space-shell weeds having been destroyed with coronium. Although, as the professor had remarked, the precaution was unnecessary, since these weeds were of an entirely different type from those developed by the Strausvig scientists.

Professor Calthay had just lit his pipe, and Gage was idly turning the pages of a magazine when the sound came. Not the sound of weeds. But the low drone of airplane motors high up in the sky above the cloud level. Steadily it grew nearer, louder.

"Something funny about that," Gage said. "That's a six-motor stratosphere

transport, or I'm a Dutchman. But it's coming down, and there's no ship scheduled here at this time of day."

He turned and ran into the house, to reappear a moment later with a pair of binoculars. Followed by Calthay, he moved out into the yard. And then the plane broke through the clouds.

Gage, focusing the glasses, gave a yell of surprise. "It's radio-controlled!" he cried. "See the helix-antenna? There's no one aboard!"

Straight as a bullet the plane shot toward the ground. And now the two scientists could detect the markings on the wings: the circle-surrounded triangle of Strausvig's Empire. At an altitude of fifteen hundred feet the plane abruptly banked and began to circle.

Then a trap opened in the bottom of the fuselage, and something plummeted downward like a falling stone.

"It's a seed bomb!" Calthay cried. "Get the coronium!"

But an instant later the two men stood stunned. The seed bomb had burst, and already before their eyes weeds were taking growth. Even as they watched the ground seemed to quiver, erupting greenish stalks which shot up, matured to full growth and multiplied with terrific rapidity. In a matter of seconds the field was an expanding sea of green, and a dull roar mounted into the air as the weeds swept forward on four fronts.

"Come on!" Calthay cried. "We've got to get the coronium. If a wind springs up and hits those weeds, the plague will start again. We'll all be madmen!"

They turned and rushed toward the barn. There they met Peterson and Field, his hired man. Feverishly they began the task of loading the metal coronium tanks into the rear of the Peterson truck. But Gage, after the last tank had been put in place, suddenly turned, a queer glitter in his eyes, and ran in long strides back to the house.

The truck rumbled out onto the field, Calthay and Peterson working like mad to fasten long nozzles with tube-metal

hoses to the coronium containers. When they reached the field they stopped for moment, appalled. As far as the eye could reach, the farm was a great sea of weeds. An ever-growing ocean of green, sweeping outward.

Calthay's heart sank. They could never stop the enveloping advance with the little coronium they had. Indeed, even as Calthay looked, he doubted whether the coronium would have any effect at all on this new variety of weeds. All the preparations of the last month seemed in vain.

"Field!" he yelled. "Rush back to the house, get Fort Snelling on long-distance telephone and tell them what's happening. Tell them to bring every available tank of coronium gas there is in the district. Tell them to radio Washington. Call the governor. When the wind starts, the plague will sweep across the country like a thousand Black Deaths!"

EVEN as he spoke the wind came. As if to a magic touch the field of weeds swayed and gave forth a high singing chord. Like a huge chorus of contraltos the vibrations rose, louder and louder. And with that sound Calthay felt the madness, like a bulbous entity alive, beginning to eat into his brain.

Field and Peterson had fallen to the ground and were clawing at their hair, screaming insanely. The wind increased.

And then the scientist heard a dull rumble. He saw his assistant, Lawson Gage, rushing forward propelling a two-wheel cart, laden with machinery, even as the plane circled again to drop another seed bomb. Above it, resting on a wooden superstructure, was a large waferlike object, yellowish brown in color, with a network of wires.

Through bloodshot eyes the professor saw that Gage's face exhibited no signs of madness. His eyes were gleaming with anticipation; he wore over his ears a head-set of strange, oversize ear-phones.

With a quick movement Gage halted the cart and brought out three more pairs of earphones. He snapped one over the head of Calthay, bent down and repeated the process with Peterson and Field.

To his amazement, Calthay found the madness in his brain had subsided.

"It's my own idea of a method to stop the plague," Gage said. "I've been working on it while you were at Flagstaff, but I said nothing because I haven't had a chance to try it out as yet.

"Those earphones will permit you to hear me because I'm talking to you through a microphone. They also neutralize the sound energy of the weeds at the same time."

"But how—" Calthay demanded. "How? The government has been experimenting for weeks on something like this, but failed. What's that thing up there? It looks like a gigantic seed."

"That's exactly what it is," Gage replied. "It contains thousands of partially germinated weed seeds held together in a collodion paste. All growth, as anyone who believes in the mechanist theory knows, is a form of energy. I discovered that the energy of the space-shell weeds is a negative energy. I'm fighting it with what I call the Gage-mass ray, a super-development of Goldstein's 'Canalstrahlen' and the Thomson 'Positive Ray.'

"By ionization of gas at a low pressure in a strong electric field, I can detach the negative electrons from the atoms, recapture those electrons by colliding them with charged particles and produce a neutral ray. That's what I'm doing inside that huge seed.

"The neutral ray," he continued, "is adaptable to almost any form of transmission. A small part of it deflected along a high-frequency electric current into your earphones. That neutralizes the madness striking your brain. Since light and sound are both vibrations—as is energy itself, in fact—I had no difficulty shunting the remainder into the vibratory field. In other words, I'm

fighting the weeds through their own sound!"

GAGE turned a dial and pulled a switch. A low drone rose up into the air. He pulled a second switch. The droning mounted slowly. Even with earphones on, Calthay could hear it.

And something was happening to the field of weeds! Writhing as in agony, the top blooms were slowly turning black.

The wind became a driving gale. Mounting in magnitude, the horrible wailing chord rose higher. Again Calthay could feel the madness eating at his brain. The earphones seemed powerless to prevent it. He saw Peterson rock backward and utter a hoarse scream. He saw Gage's face go white, his teeth bite deep into his lips.

And then, with shaking hands, the assistant turned his control as far as it would go.

An arc of purplish flame hovered above the machinery-laden cart. The singing chord died away, and before them the weeds seemed slowly to dissolve into nothingness. A hush fell over the farm. A moment later, where the green stalks had been was only bleak desolation. . . .

"It's all over," Professor John Calthay said that night on the veranda of the Peterson house. "With Gage's machine and others which will be built like it, we can prevent the weed growth in any part of the country. The attempt of Melaris-A to annihilate the civilization of the Earth has been defeated. Strausvig and his Middle Europe can be fought on common grounds. The 'War of the Weeds' is at an end.

"And it's all through your efforts," the scientist went on, turning toward his assistant. "Once again, Gage, you have won over me in conquering a problem. What have you to say, my young friend?"

Lawson Gage smiled. "Pour me another highball," he said. "And don't hold the horses on the Scotch." ● ● ●

COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

small tears and punctures in it be easily repaired. Nobody has apparently introduced Professor Richardson to the atom or hydrogen bomb, but it is also true that if one of these were used, there wouldn't be any city left, anyway, so it might be quibbling to argue about the roof going along in the general disappearance.

Let us assume the good professor advances his plastic roof for more or less normal conditions only—up to and including 500-pound bombs, rain, hail, snow and wind.

It seems to us, if our memory be reliable, that our old-time science fiction writers shared our own distrust of plastics, and when inventing such things as a city-wide roof, usually had it built of something relatively sturdy like a newly invented transparent metal.

Our Personal Canopy

With metal we are prepared to string along. A roof of metal, with sliding doors to let helicopters in and out sounds a good deal more practical than plastic pillows filled with helium floating aloft like so many children's beach toys. All we need is the transparent metal. So, pending its invention, we intend to continue living in the country and wearing our rubbers on the days when rain turns the roads and streets into merry little rivers and carrying our own personal canopy in the form of that ridiculous but eminently practical device, the umbrella.

We held out against the umbrella for more than twenty years. We considered carrying one a sign of doddering senility. We got wet and soggy in defense of our individuality. Then we discovered that doddering it may be, but the darn thing worked. Say what you will about the umbrella, it keeps the rain off—unless you run into a high wind, then you face the same kind of problems Professor Richardson faces with his plastic roof. When nature gets really rough, man can do little more than take cover and wait for the fireworks to subside.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

WE HAVE discovered, with something akin to dismay, that our alert and inquisitive readers (oh, the alertest!) count the number of letters appearing in an issue, divide

and subdivide them by territory, sex and name and hold popularity contests on the basis of which fan got his name mentioned when and where. Scares us a little.

THE "AH'S" OF TEXAS

by Bobby Stewart

Dear Sam: Gosh, but I wish your name was Jean, instead of Sam, so that instead of saying "Dear Sam," I could say "Hygiene." No, Sam, put down that empty Xeno jug! Help! Ahhhhh!!!!!! That's better!! And for not bashing in my skullbone (add one helping of Pogo) I promise to have a new opening joke for every letter of mine that you print! A sure way to stay out of your letter columns.

Now that the preliminaries are over let's move on to other things. The cover for instance: Now, Sam, I've only been in the sfantasy mags for 2 (count 'em) years, but I can safely say that the Jan. FSM had one of the stupidest, sorriest, and silliest covers ever to appear on a sf mag. To me it looked like a little, green man wearing a sea-diver's mask holding up a man's chest. The men are expressionless, but the girl seems happy. All of the characters in Bergey's illos have a peculiar method of holding their hands. Take a look at the Jan. pic and you'll see what I mean.

Moving on to the stories—: THE MERMAN I liked. First de Camp story I ever liked. In 2nd place I rate THE DISINHERITORS. In fact, (durst I say it?) I've liked every Matheson story I have ever read except BORN OF MAN AND WOMAN. If this is printed imagine the pounds of letters I will get explaining in detail why BOMAW was a classic story and what was so good about it. Haven't read YANK AT VALHALLA and I don't think I will.

Gotta go. Notice you printed letters from 3 (count 'em) TEXANs in last ish so maybe mine stands a chance of getting printed.—Route 4, Box 8, Kirbyville, Tex.

The only thing that saved you was the fact that there hasn't been an empty Xeno jug around these parts since Sarge Saturn packed his carpetbag and departed for climes unknown. But we Pogue you (yuk). Sorry you feel so badly about the cover—I think this was the last Bergey. It smeared up a bit in reproduction; the original painting seemed better. Glad you liked the de Camp, we've got some more of those coming up.

Well, talking about coincidences (who was?) here's another Bobby Stewart. . .

UNQUOTE

by Bob Stewart

Dear Mr. Mines: I could begin this with something more personal like, SAM? Okay, I'll begin

over.

Dear SAM: Again I am drooling over that beootiful cover!! And that new format! WOW! Looks like I'm looking through a periscope. Again, WOW!

But—(don't look so smug) I'm not finished yet. Stories. Yes. Stories . . . Gahhhhhh! Can't you buy better ones from someone like . . . like, say, ME, for instance. I write wonderful stories. Oh yes I do. Got 14 rejection slips so far. 15—one from you. Mostly because I can't type. But I can't help it. I can't help it if the 's' keeps moving over to where the 'a' is supposed to be. It's the typewriter's fault. It's alive! (Now there's an idea for a story. Wanna buy it for 5 bucks?) But—however—ahem! AHEM! As I was saying, the stories. . . .

The Gods Hate Kansas—Where'd ya steal that one from?

The Girl Next Door—Gooooo!

The Moebius Room—Quote, blankety-blank-blank! unquote.

That is as far as I got. It's kind of hard reading a magazine when it's on fire. (Who set it on fire? Why, me, of course.)—274 Arlington St., San Francisco, California.

One man's drool is another man's poison. It looks to me as if that typewriter is leading you around by the proboscis. Get rid of it, boy. Don't be dictated to by a typewriter with shifty letters. When you go to press an "a" and find an "s" instead the very pillars of society crumble and the earth opens beneath your feet. First thing you know you'll be a writer and everybody in town will try to borrow money from you.

MACHINE MADE

by Rhoda Kater

Dear Sam: This letter is about the November ish of F S M. I am afraid it will be a little too late to get into the letter column, but then who cares? (I do).

Anyhow, this will be a short one, since my husband is yelling for supper, and he threatens to throw the typer out the window, if I don't come and feed him.

THE GODS HATE KANSAS I read in the original S S and I can't remember what I thought of it then, but now it is very good. Perhaps a little dated, but not enough to make a difference.

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR smacks a little of Mickey Spillane, but I like M S. The story was nice, and a rather good idea.

THE MOEBIUS ROOM was nice. Intelligent, well thought out, and (lousy spelling) intellectual.

ITS LIKE THIS—very nice. Are we all nuts?

IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING—gaah. Horror. Phooey.

THE DECIDING FACTOR—what, another one? When will the world become something nice from machines, instead of a horror place? I like machines. In fact, I adore them. They make life so much easier.

A family matter—novel, and neat.

So long. My man is getting mad.

We've always wondered what happened to a famn when she got married, now we know. She

becomes a housewife like any other gal and has to get her science fiction in between dishing up the hamburger and running for the bicarb. Anybody recognize Rickey Slavin under the Rhoda Kater monicker?

MAKING THEM LAST

by Anne Forster

Dear Mr. Mines: My primary purpose is to enclose thirty cents for a copy of the Spring issue with DAWN OF FLAME and THE BLACK FLAME by Stanley Weinbaum. Because subscription copies usually arrive looking as if they had just emerged from a losing battle with a ton steel casting, I've been buying from the newsstands. This most important time something went wrong. In the general course of events I don't expect you to be an errand boy for me but please, I'd so like to have a copy.

It seems to me that the quality of your stories has been going up and up. That sounds like a paradox since they are reprints, but perhaps your selection is getting finer. The quantity also intrigues me. Personally, a long novel is preferable—one that can be an evening's entertainment without leaving me at loose ends somewhere an hour or so before bedtime. Do you ever "last" stories? I do. Just like a kid with a chocolate bar. First read swiftly, then re-read here and there, then read slowly on and repeat.

My favorite of your authors is Leigh Brackett and her loveliest tale is SEA KINGS OF MARS, which is a trite title for a fanciful piece of work. Wonder why it wasn't called THE SWORD OF RHIANNON? Next is Edmund Hamilton with his VALLEY OF CREATION. Then Murray Leinster and BLACK BUTTERFLIES, which is a gem of shorter length. Someone snagged that on me too. At least I can't find it. Did you say something about later novels? How about SLAN? That's a really fine bit of reading which I'm proud to own.—R. 2, B. 41, Kingston, N. Y.

Being a thwarted naturalist by trade, as Pogo would say, we early collected a young library of books on flora and fauna and we got our youthful practice in "lasting" books on this solid reading matter. There was a certain volume by Ernest Thompson Seton which we read completely through about once a month for years. After awhile we knew it by heart and could quote whole pages without difficulty, yet we continued to read it with all the fine enjoyment and sense of discovery we had in the first reading. We never thought of this behavior as particularly naïve either. This happens when someone writes a book you wished you had written yourself. It speaks in your own language and your own thoughts, so you never get tired of it.

Something of this sort has happened to many people who have discovered the amazing worlds of science fiction. People with imaginations who have wondered if they were alone in the

rich fantasies of their thoughts have a sense of coming home, a sense of comradeship with others who, astonishingly, speak their thoughts too. Good thing.

INVITATION

by **Larry Touzinsky**
Editor, FAN TO SEE

Dear Sam: Below is a open letter to all fans in the Missouri area. I hope that you will be able to print it in your letter section of FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE:

OPEN LETTER TO ALL FANS AROUND MISSOURI:

All men living in or around Missouri are invited to join the MSFL. The purpose of this fan club is to organize and represent fandom in Missouri, to a greater degree in the Science Fiction World. All men living in this area are requested to write either Paul Mittelbuscher, Sweet Springs, Mo., or myself, for further information and application.—2911 Minnesota Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo.

FAN TO SEE—! For that we ought to picket you, and would if Mittelbuscher weren't a friend of ours. Hope you get all the members you deserve.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS

by **Dean Hill**

Dear Mr. Mines: After a silence of five years I have been forced, by under-handed methods, to say something to a certain Mr. Tuning. It seems that in his haste to bury the hatchet with Snarly von Seibel he has picked on my favorite former eddy-tear. Yes, I mean Merwin. Perhaps we should agree with Bill but even I can remember when SS and TWS were just average pulp mags (tops now, of course, along with FSM), but anyone that says they were just average when Merwin quit will earn my eternal curse. TWS was the first SF mag I ever read and I may be a bit partial, but I believe there are plenty of good ole fen to back me up.

Ah, finally a place to say a few words about reprints, re-reprints, and other various, assorted, miscellaneous items. Since I didn't get in on the first of SF I must have missed quite a batch of stories. Undoubtedly some were good and some were not so good. (A mild way to put it.) But I missed them so I'm all in favor of reprints. I might find a story I like. (I have; SLAN, A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER, to name a couple off hand.) So keep 'em coming. We love 'em.

In Nov. FSM I enjoyed all the new stories and the reprint was pretty fair also. Not being a professional critic (nor an amateur critic either), I will leave the experts to their own judgments.

But the cover. The new Bergey. This is still Bergey, new or old. Are those things snakes, octopi, or just trees?

Well, despite Bud Bill Tuning's remarks and Bergey's cover, I liked the ish. So keep up the good work.—1063 Emerson Ave., Salt Lake City, Utah.

[Turn page]

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What's an eternal curse? Anyway, relax, Dean, your favorite eddy-tear is still around, now making like a free-lance writer. We have bought several Merwin stories for SS and TWS, so keep an eye (the good one) fixed on those sterling mags (have you seen SS in its swank new size with trimmed edge format?).

Bergey, as you know by now, I'm sure, has passed away. And the greater pity, too, because apart from personal or emotional considerations, Bergey was a remarkable artist who was improving just as fast as the growth of science fiction would let him.

It's a long jump from "popular electrical experiments" to SLAN and a longer one to THE LOVERS or DOUBLE MEANING. The reprints in FSM are a bridge between the old world of science fiction and the new. Like anything else, science fiction moves and changes; it does not stand still. The art work followed that growth just as the writing did.

And Bergey, who had received his early experience with the mad machines, the BEMS and babes of the early space opera period, was maturing and bringing out new techniques with his new covers, which were exciting to watch. Had he lived you would hardly have recognized the new Bergey.

TREASURES

by M. McNell

Dear Sir: Bought the Nov. FSM today. A rather poor ish, with a lousy cover. Oh, please, can't I get Paul ? ? ? ? ? He beats Schomburg, Bergey, Finlay, Orban, and all the rest 10000000-0000000000 to 00000000000000000000.

Try to pronounce that figure.

THE MOEBIUS ROOM is excellent; the rest vary from average to terrible.

I see Farsace is looking for treasures. Well, if any of you piddle chance to have any of these, please write me: ARGOSY Feb. 1896; ALL-STORY Jan. 1905; SCRAP BOOK Sept. 1911; CAMELEON Apr. 1909, Apr. 1910, Aug. Sept. Oct. Nov. 1911; Jan. 11, Jan. 18, 1913; PEOPLES Feb. 10-May 10, 1918; EVERYBODY'S June-Sept. 1917; AIR ADVENTURES June 1928; AVIATION MECHANICS any 1929 issues except Jan.-July; APPLETON'S Jan. 1, 1876; POPULAR Feb. 1904, Nov. 1, 1912; COLLIERS Apr. 22, 1916; some other miscellany around 1913-17, mostly, and a few regular sfzines. I'll pay fabulous prices.

I recommend these stories:

AW—Air Wonder; SW—Science W.; SWQ SWQtly; W—Wonder; WQ W. Qtly)
THE ONSLAUGHT FROM VENUS—Phil-lips—SW 9/29

THE METAL WORLD—Repp SW 10/29

THE VAPOR INTELLIGENCE—Barnette SW 1/30 (I'll never forget that cover! If you have the original, please reprint it.)

THE ISLANDS IN THE AIR—Morrow AW 7/29

THE FLIGHT OF THE MERCURY—Tanner W 7/30

Anything in 8/30 W (all A+ tales but one B+)

MAROONED IN ANDROMEDA—W. 10/30
Oh, I could go on, but what point? Anyway, use more from the Gernsback treasure house.

Would you have any SFL equips left over? If so, would you sell a few as curiosities? — 2010 McClellon, Houston 25, Texas.

What out of the world are SFL equips? Science Fiction League? It has been slightly inactive. In fact it has been deadlier than the dodo for at least ten years that I know of. I have one souvenir button which I found in a drawer when I inherited this desk.

Don't think anybody can get Paul now. I talked with him a few months ago and he said he was very busy doing book jackets and had no intention of returning to magazine illustration. His only indulgence in that line, I believe, is his designing a rather elaborate Christmas card for Hugo Gernsback each year, a card which takes the form of a miniature magazine, extravagantly burlesqued.

NOSTALGIA

by Jan Gardner

Dear Sam: The November issue of FANTASTIC STORY Magazine was tops! As a rule reprints don't carry much weight with me nor do symbolic covers but the atmospheric effect of your current cover and the high quality of THE GODS HATE KANSAS have broken down my resistance. Now the only way I can keep from succumbing to a worse disease—that of boredom—is to read FANTASTIC STORY Magazine regularly. Horrors look what you and your magazine have done to me! One thin quarter every other month will depart forever from my moth-filled purse! If this keeps on I may throw away my last vestige of insanity and subscribe!

After reading THE GODS HATE KANSAS I say to myself, "Hmmm; this is a classic. Seems to me I've read a few other good tales recently too such as . . . let me see . . . tale by the name of THE BLACK FLAME, another one called DAWN OF FLAME. Yup, yup, those were good. Remember one by the name of THE EVENING STAR, and a zipdoodler called SLAN . . . ah, there was a story! Say!" I say to myself, I say. "What mags did those good yarns appear in?" And upon thumbing through my atomic stock-pile of sf mags I find that every one of those stories appeared in FANTASTIC STORY Magazine.

I hate to admit it, it being so early in the morning, but your magazine is good! (I said it, and I'm glad!)

Next to the lead novel, THE MOEBIUS ROOM rated high with me. I like idea-stories like this, and ever since I learned how to construct a moebius strip I've never been able to resist a plot built around topology. Suggestion: why don't you print up a small pamphlet on this moebius business? Have one of your more sci-

entifically-inclined authors write it, so it'll be interesting to dead-heads like me, and I'll bet you'll have a sell-out on your hands. You just don't know how fascinating that subject is to us stf fans. (Or maybe you do.) Lacking that, could you or the fans tell me where I can get more info on topology? Who knows, maybe it's possible to work it around a bit and write a stf story with only one side... **SHEER INTEREST**... and that has no end. That way all you'd have to do would be to buy one tale from each of your best writers and run it forever in your mag. Then we'd all be satisfied.

IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING was next on my agenda. The plot had a sound basis that would inevitably produce a combination horror-interest-roller-coaster effect. Good! I feel this tale beat out **THE GIRL NEXT DOOR** and **IT'S LIKE THIS**, for third place, by a considerable head. **THE GIRL NEXT DOOR** left a tantalizing after-taste of pleasure and **IT'S LIKE THIS** was only a hair-breadth less pleasurable to read.

A FAMILY MATTER rated next, but was rather low on the interest side. A nice idea, but not enough punch to really click. **THE DECIDING FACTOR**, in my opinion, was the one real bad story of the issue. Very little interest in spite of the attempt at human-interest-characterization. These yarns with numbers instead of names for characters spoil the tale before it even gets started and no amount of double-duty work at the end can rectify it.

But all in all a good issue! I still stand firm on my opinion at the beginning of this letter. **THE GODS HATE KANSAS**, **THE MOEBIUS ROOM**, and **IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING** made the November issue tops with me.—*Apredelon, Canterbury, N. H.*

We could hate ourselves for enticing all these lean and hungry quarters out of your moth-eaten purse if we didn't happen to remember from our own lean and quarter-less youth that the solid metal of cash money is a fleeting thing compared to the lasting joy of the satisfied mind. No matter how difficult it seemed to trade one of those few quarters for some pages filled with type, if a single new idea came out of that transaction the price became infinitesimal. We congratulate you on having the quarters.

You've got an idea, incidentally, on the moebius strip business. We've had a lot of fun with the moebius strip as a parlor game and it might make an interesting article. The moebius principle can be extended into three dimensions you know—there's a moebius bottle known as a Klein (not sure of the spelling) bottle. If we can line up an engineer to write us one, we'll get you an article.

NO GRIPE—NO RATE by Dick Clarkson

Dear SaM: As a rule, I have nothing to say in the gripe department, but there comes a time in the life of every fan... anyhow, I had thought

[Turn page]

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that the Jays were long gone and far away (Ghu! How I love those clichés) when you had to step so far down for material in CE that you had to use letters (gasp!) **RATING** the stories to fill it out with! That still burns me. But I've been over all that before.

Tell me, Sam: I have a lot of questions about that cover. I guess it was a Bergey, although it didn't say so on the cover. But here are the questions: One, what was it? Two, why? Three, if it was by Bergey, then it's the worst he ever did, by a long shot. Your format idea is novel, but you seem to get very little to put into it.

There seem to be several others than myself who have used Seibel as a good topic of conversation. Let me say here that any snide remarks I may make in the rest of this paragraph should be construed as an attempt at facetiousness. In all honesty, Seibel's letters put a bang into your mags. Now, whether the bang is a good bang or a bad bang I don't care. He does liven up your letter columns some. The guy obviously is laboring under delusions of something-or-other, but just the same, while he's trying without much success to ape Al Capp, his letters sure are radical. And you have to have different stuff in any form of s-f, whether it be fandom or in a promag. I still don't like Seibel's letters, but there must be someone who does, even if it's only Seibel himself.

What happened to the big, bad battle we had going last ish on reprints vs. no reprints? I've had my say there, but just the same I can't see why in one ish you're loaded with that kind (and therefore you have a much better column than when you have to hit bottom with rating-type letters), and the next time not a word is said. Hum.

As usual, I liked your novel. Being a reprint, it was a little better than the average novel of today (since, as I said, you have such a wider range to choose from), but even then you always come up with good novels. That's all I've had time to read. Sorry. But I refuse to rate stories!

Since everyone has, or seems to have, a suggestion for a novel for you to reprint, I might as well say something there. How about the null-A series? Or just one of 'em that is. Of course if you want to print the entire series, that's fine here. When I say series, you have to take it with a grain of salt . . . probably they are among the top in the list of short series, there being exactly two.

Guess I'll go for a 171 while. See ya in Philly, next year—c/o Harvard Univ., Lionel B-12, Cambridge, Mass

We've been cutting the ratings out of letters at a great rate (ouch) but occasionally let some get by because we think they raise interesting points. Gooseflesh mostly. You'll notice that many of the ratings are uncomplimentary enough, indicating that we don't hand-pick them to make us feel good. Sometimes ratings start a feud and we're very good at holding coats while you and him fight. But the majority of ratings, with which most letters used to be crammed, have been taken out bodily.

So Snarly Seibel gets you, does he? The man is a sand burr under the saddle of humanity. But don't step on him—even a sand burr must

have a part in the cosmic scheme of things. Snarlly, are you listening?

STARTING YOUNG by Eugene Caldwell

Dear Mr. Mines: This is the first time I have ever written to any S-F mag besides SS, to find out how to go about getting an English book listed in their book review column.

I'm 14 years old and have been reading S-F since I was 12. My first book was Murray Leinster's *LAST SPACESHIP* and that got me started. (By the way, the first magazine I picked up was the Summer, 1951 issue of *FSM*.)

I've got a pretty good assortment of S-F and fantasy books and mags. I'd like to get more, but not enough money. If any of your readers would like to buy any of my books, just write to my address below and I'll send you a list. I'm selling my novels at lower prices than they were published.

Could anyone get me the March 1952 issue of *STARTLING* with Kuttner's *WELL OF THE WORLDS* for my mag collection at a reasonable price?

I think your change from quarterly to bi-monthly was a good idea because now I can read some of the science-fiction I missed.—5770 N. River Forest Drive, Milwaukee 9, Wisc.

I presume, since you didn't ask for it again, that we gave you Ken Slater's address, from whom you can purchase English stf. You'll get your March copy of SS, all right. In fact, if the fans run true to form as they have, you'll be having trouble with the mailman.

THE ONLY DEFEATIST by Helen Hendrix

Dear Mr. Mines: I have just finished reading the November issue of *Startling Stories* and was impressed mostly by, not the stories, but the ravings in the Ethergrams about *THE LOVERS*. I am so new at the game of science fiction reading that I missed the August issues of every magazine published. Where can I get one? If it is as good as your readers seem to think, and you think, I don't want to miss out.

When I made the amazing discovery that you edited both *Startling Stories* and *Fantastic Stories* (told you I was new at this) a few minutes ago it came to me that I should tell you how much I enjoyed *A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER* in the September issue of *Fantastic Stories*. I have been thinking ever since I read it that I should tell somebody it was good. I've told all my friends and family and it's your turn next. There are very few stories, books, and what have you, that I really hate to come to the end of. But *A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER* was. If I was still reading it, I'd be happy. Kuttner's style is terrific, but the best of all was the way he incorporated actual events into the story, the images on Easter Island. The *Lost Atlantis*, the way he seems to

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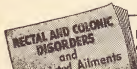


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actually explain our biggest mysteries. I found myself almost believing him.

Wonder if anyone has discovered the slight play on religion in this story. Ardath of Kyria seemed to have so much to do with the making of earth and its peoples, here long before they came, and here long after they will fade. It is an interesting point of view to have if anyone is tired of the hell and brimstone idea of religion, and I'm one of them. Not that I believe Ardath is really circling the earth, but it gives man some hope that he is not left alone in space, and yet is not the all-powerful creature that we so gleefully pretend to be. If more people would read science fiction they would see how ridiculous their ideas are. And that is what it has done to me; taken the miserably small ideas out of my mind and showed me the infinite possibilities of how we can look at the life we lead. We seem so small and unimportant. It makes you wonder how we can fight and have wars, killing off our neighbors. It is about as important in the worlds of space as a couple of amoeba spitting at each other. I just hope that my findings are shared by others. I would hate to be the only defeatist in the crowd.—4845 Swiss, Dallas, Texas.

Most readers, I believe, do find their ideas and thinking enlarged by reading science fiction. Most show an amazing tolerance for new concepts, even when their emotions recoil from the alienness of it. There will always be people with closed minds, too, who read only to find support for their preconceived ideas; who can read even science fiction and take from it only what they want, rejecting all the rest without any sense of incongruity. But there's always hope. And don't feel you're alone.

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGES

by Henry Moskowitz

Mines Dear Sam: Just now—with the mood I'm in—I could cheerfully take a swipe at you with Conan's mighty, two-edged sword. I'm mad. Fighting mad. And a good thing for you that I hadn't seen this—November—issue of FSM when I visited you last Monday.

Back in August you told me that this ish would contain several reprints. Several. Where'd you learn to count? Bah! And double bah! Pooley too!

THE GODS HATE KANSAS was good. But being so recent—November 1941 issue of STARTLING STORIES—I object to its reprint at this time. We want older stuff. The Finlay illos were . . . Finlay illos. What more can I say?

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR. Well, you know my opinion of Crossen. I like him, that's all. The illo was fair.

I wonder if you realized the fact when you bought "IT'S LIKE THIS," but the story isn't just a usual short. If memory serves, this is the first Lefty Baker story in two or three years. Guy by the name of Craig Browning used to write them for either AS or FA. I wonder how well Rog

knows this guy Browning. (Ha!)

Miller's story was run-of-the-mill. Personally, I liked Bradbury's depiction of a rocket's feelings in I, ROCKET back in a '44 AS. (What a memory!)

What happened to the Schomburg illo? Bad reproduction? Sure, he wouldn't change his style. Who illoed the Phillips yarn? I've been staring at it for ten seconds and can't remember; that's all the time I can allot.

Now, next issue, by comparison, will be a sparkling start for 53. A YANK AT VALHALLA is a good choice, even though it's from the the January 1941 ish of SS. But, in this case, I make a special allowance for Edmond Hamilton. Boy! This was supposed to have been a '51 choice. THE MERMAN comes from the December 1938 issue of ASF. THE CASE OF JACK FREYSLING from the October 1944 ish of that same mag.

So the question arises. How does Mines's company get Street & Smith reprint rights? Since when has S & S released them, anyway.

That tar editorial of yours was darn enjoyable. Keep with it.

It may interest Richard C. Spelman to know that Conan appeared in the novel in the October SPACE STORIES. Conan is appearing in book form from Gnome Press. Conan was in the September SPACE SCIENCE FICTION. But he ain't—and never was—science-fiction. In honor of Howard's memory let's not try to make him so.

Farsace is an amazing—no, change that to fantastic—fellow. If he was . . . started when he offered some mags for sale; i.e., several volumes of ASF and several issues of CAPTAIN FUTURE. Guess which ones sold first. Right. CF. That mean anything? Mull it over, old pal.

Until all us yanks meet at Valhalla, I seem to think I'll see you in TWS, SpS, several issues of SS, and maybe WSA, too.

I might even drop by again at your office. If I need any gossip for "Spatial Relations," Moskowitz's first column, in Brevizine. Address: Fantasy Pocketbooks, 5018 West 18th Street, Cicero 50, Illinois. Get it today! 10c.—Three Bridges, N. J.

Item one, Hank, if you don't get a new typewriter ribbon, the printer will be sending you letters. Not nice ones, either. How does FSM get S & S stories? Simple. We buy 'em. Anything else you'd like to know? Who's Conan? Hank, remember your blood pressure.

UNTO DUST

by Milton Desmond Emery

Dear Ed: After I read my first stf mag, about 6 or 7 years ago, I started to write a letter. After reading it over from an editor's viewpoint I decided that it was nothing but a lot of superlatives, so it has now crumpled to dust in some forgotten corner. Let the other fans write, let George do it. During the interval between then and now, I still thought of science-fiction in superlatives, and still let George write letters for me, because he seemed to do it much better than I.

The time has come however to take matters into

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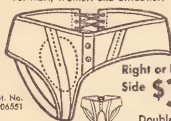
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my own hands. So, after several false starts in the last few months, I am finally doing it myself. Because, at last, the other fans are not expressing my opinions on various and sundry matters.

I realize that most editors like short letters, and as my opinions on the latest controversies, to wit, sex, and religion, are far too lengthy and personal to write about. I merely ask that we change the subject, huh, please? That way, I won't have to get riled up every time I read the letters. I don't see how some people can be so queer about these natural and wonderful things (both of them) without being sent to the nearest mental hospital. But I said I didn't want to discuss it, didn't I? Well, anyway, let's argue about something more important, like whether BEMs when they're good, should be allowed in stf. But I'm sure that any loyal fan will think of things to argue about. If only to keep the letter column alive.

Some features I would like to see in our mag would be a column for the names of fans who want other fans to write, but whose letters (like this one, probably) are blue-penciled to death. Another feature would be contests for cover-naming, or best letter, or some such thing.

One thing I can't understand about the average fan is his raving cries for bi-monthly or monthly mags, when I can't possibly afford to pay for all of them even now. I hope some mags stay quarterly and bi-monthly for me.

The last thing I want to talk about in stfdom in this letter is rating stories and/or mags. I feel that since no mag prints the same stories over and over again, no mag can remain in the same place on any list. As the quality of stories vary, so varies the quality of mags. I know that under the editorship of Sam No. 1 SS, TWS, and FSM progressed from ordinary mags towards the tops in reading quality. It seems that Sam No. 2 intends to keep them going, but already they've slipped in places. But even the pocket-size mags have slipped often and sometimes badly. It seems rather late to offer congratulations on your new position, Sam, but here they are, for what they're worth, and, if I write again before another 6 years pass, I'll let you know how your mags are doing.—93 Hemlock Street, St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada.

This is a real compliment, telling us we're slipping—we accept the congratulations in the spirit they are offered. Sure wish you weren't so miserly with paper and had gone on to elaborate that point; now you've just left us in the dark. And since it might be six years before you write another letter explaining this one, it sounds downright unfair to editors. So we'd really like it if you'd break down and cut those six years some.

And that, fellow sufferers, seems to be it for another session. Be back in two months for the gala Shelton edition, with two (count 'em) two—wonderful short novels, DEVILS FROM DARKONIA and BATTLE OF THE BRAINS, plus other shorts, new and old and ye column of readers' quips and groans. Be hearing you.

—The Editor